Syrian Youth and the Public Sphere
After a Decade of Conflict

A comparative survey among four groups of Syrian youth

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Executive Summary

This study aims to contribute to international endeavors to increase youth engagement in conflict zones. We studied the youth of Syria, a country that stepped out of four decades of dictatorship into a public uprising overwhelmingly shaped by youth, then into a decade of war. The war is still ongoing, as is Syria's political fragmentation into three main control areas.

Our objective was to explore the relationship between young Syrians and the public sphere of their country from three perspectives: youth interest and attitudes toward public affairs, their engagement levels, and the obstacles preventing them from being more engaged. We also reflect on current interventions and recommend others.

The study adopted a quantitative field-based approach, using survey as the primary data collection method. To account for Syria's political fragmentation, the study took place across four areas: regime-controlled, opposition-controlled, and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled areas of Syria, and Syrian communities within Turkey. The survey reached 1,000 respondents and investigated each of the three key variables (interest, engagement, and obstacles) via multiple questions. This approach offered a unique comparative perspective of Syrian youth in different political contexts inside or outside Syria, and also allowed some wider comparison between different ethnic, gender, educational, and age groups.

Our findings suggest that nearly half of Syrian youth are fairly interested in the public sphere. Among the control areas, youth interest is highest in SDF and opposition areas, then in regime areas, and finally among Syrian youth living in Turkey. The three dominant perceptions of the public sphere among research participants were "a stressful area best avoided," a "civic duty" and "a right to be strived for." But the most interesting difference among the control areas was that higher numbers of participants in both regime areas and in Turkey tend to see the public sphere as "a risky endeavor with consequences." The same was true for Arab respondents in the SDF area, who marked the public sphere as "risky" at a much higher percentage than Kurds.

We explored youth engagement levels through association with collective frameworks such as political parties or movements, humanitarian or civil society organizations, trade or student unions, and others. But the rate of engagement was much lower than the rate of interest. The highest level of engagement was with humanitarian and civil society organizations and volunteer teams or campaigns. On the other hand, less than ten percent of the youth we met were connected to any political group or trade/student union. In addition, of the one-third of the sample who reported being a member of any collective framework, only half had participated in an event or activity related to their frameworks during the three months before we met with them.

A wide range of obstacles exist which limit youth engagement. Most notable was "livelihood pressures" (especially in regime areas), then poor education and qualifications among youth (this was higher in SDF areas), and third was youth's "fear of authorities," highest among Syrian youth in Turkey and then in regime areas.

The last chapter of this study is about interventions: the availability of empowerment programs for youth in Syria and Turkey, and the most relevant types of intervention from a youth perspective. Nearly half of respondents said they had never heard about such programs being conducted in their area, and less than a quarter had ever participated in one. The data also showed that the highest rate of opportunities was in regime areas and lowest among Syrian youth living in Turkey.

From the perspective of Syrian youth, interventions should focus first on livelihood support, especially in regime and opposition areas. Education and rehabilitation programs for youth came second overall, with higher demand in opposition and SDF areas. The third priority was to address major societal problems; this demand was highest among Syrians living in Turkey. Most surprisingly, only ten percent of respondents considered the political issue a high priority; a quarter of participants in the SDF area mentioned it, while the rate was much lower in other areas.

This study was an attempt to measure the distance between Syrian youth and their political, civic, and community-based engagement. That distance appears to be both at a crisis point and promising at the same time. We see a crisis point because of their limited engagement and lack of organized activity, especially in political frameworks. But we also see promise, because even after more than a decade of war and with an uncertain political horizon, a substantial portion of young Syrians are still interested in public affairs—including those who have been forced to live outside their country—and the majority of them look to the future with optimism.

1. Introduction

"Many small people, who in many small places do many small things, can alter the face of the world."
—African wisdom

This study explores the relationship between young Syrians and the public sphere.[1] Empowering and engaging youth in public affairs has been an internationally advocated practice, especially in conflict areas. These endeavors started earlier in the 1990s and were confirmed in 2015 in the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) Resolution 2250, which urges member states to give their youth a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional, and international levels, and enable them to participate meaningfully in peace processes.[2]

While the international view is important, we find a number of reasons to study this issue specifically within the Syrian context—a country that stepped out of four decades of dictatorship to a public uprising overwhelmingly shaped by youth. From 2011 to 2013 Syria witnessed higher youth engagement in the public sphere via protests and media, as well as through civic and community activities. But that movement became less powerful in later years as the country turned into an open battlefield for a complex war with numerous internal and external actors.

Today, almost 11 years since the outbreak of the conflict and with Syria still divided among multiple conflicting authorities,[3] several clues demonstrate how Syrian youth are under-represented at both the political and apolitical levels.

For example, only 0.4% of sitting members of the Syrian parliament are under 30; only 5% are between 30 and 40.[4] Those percentages are nearly the same within the Syrian Constitutional Committee,[5] which is supposed to be a national platform responsible for drafting a new constitution with the participation of the regime, opposition groups, and Syrian civil society. Even among the Syrian advisory boards or teams that work closely with the UN special envoy office, there is no official presence for youth like the "Women's Advisory Board" and the "Civil Society Support Room."

1- For the purposes of this report, we will use the terms "public sphere" and "public affairs" interchangeably.

2- United Nations Security Council, "UNSCR 2250: Introduction," Youth4Peace Portal, 2016, accessed January 12, 2022, https://www.youth4peace.info/UNSCR2250/Introduction.

3- "Map of Military Influence in Syria," (in Arabic), Jusoor for Studies, January 1, 2021, accessed January 15, 2022, https://bit.ly/Jusoor_Military_Control_of_Syria_2021.

4- Karam Shaar and Samy Akil, "Inside Syria's Clapping Chamber: Dynamics of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections," January 2021, accessed January 19, 2022, https://www.karamshaar.com/2020-syria-parliament.

5- Karam Shaar and Ayman Dasouki, "Syria's Constitutional Committee: The Devil in the Detail," 13 December 2020, accessed January 19,2022, https://www.karamshaar.com/syrias-constitutional-committee.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Syrian youth is emerging from the background of war and political fragmentation. Some have no memories other than the war; others are old enough to have known, at least vaguely, a Syria without conflict.

Given this context, we decided to explore the relationship between Syrian youth and the public sphere of their country. We used a field-based quantitative approach to examine this relationship from three aspects: youth interest and attitudes toward public affairs, their engagement with it, and obstacles they face. We also focused on three particular domains of the public sphere: political, civic, and that of community-based collectives. Sharpening our focus further, we tried to find out to what extent Syrian youth are interested and engaged in public affairs and the patterns and contexts in which participation takes place. We also explored how participation is affected by factors like location and gender.

Since youth engagement is considered a crucial element for any sustainable peace in Syria—and since most of the literature we reviewed indicate that Syrian youth are marginalized rather than actively engaged—our study will contribute to the collective debate among researchers, activists, and policymakers concerned with youth empowerment. The more insight we gain regarding youth and the public sphere, the more we can understand, plan, and act efficiently.

In line with that goal, one essential purpose for our study is to reflect on its own findings and contextualize those findings with the relevant literature in order to generate a set of policy recommendations directed toward the key stakeholders.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative field-based approach, using structured in-person interviews as the primary method of data collection. The survey was conducted in ten locations (eight inside Syria and two in Turkey) and investigated three key variables from the life of each respondent:

- Their level of interest in public affairs, indicated by self-reporting and familiarity with different public sphere issues, and their personal perceptions toward activism in the public
- sphere
- Their engagement in the political, civic, and social aspects of the public sphere
  The main obstacles preventing youth from being more engaged in public affairs

Another group of independent variables, such as location, gender, and education, were targeted to form a foundation for comparative analysis. By linking the two sets of indicators, we were able to examine a wide network of connections, interactions, variations, and patterns.

The survey was designed to capture the above-mentioned variables; it was then reviewed by experts and examined by the field team before launching the field work. The data collection process took place between December 2021 and January 2022, carried out by 20 field researchers—one male and one female in each research location—as presented in Figure 1. The collection of data was supervised by the research team, with feedback given on a daily basis.
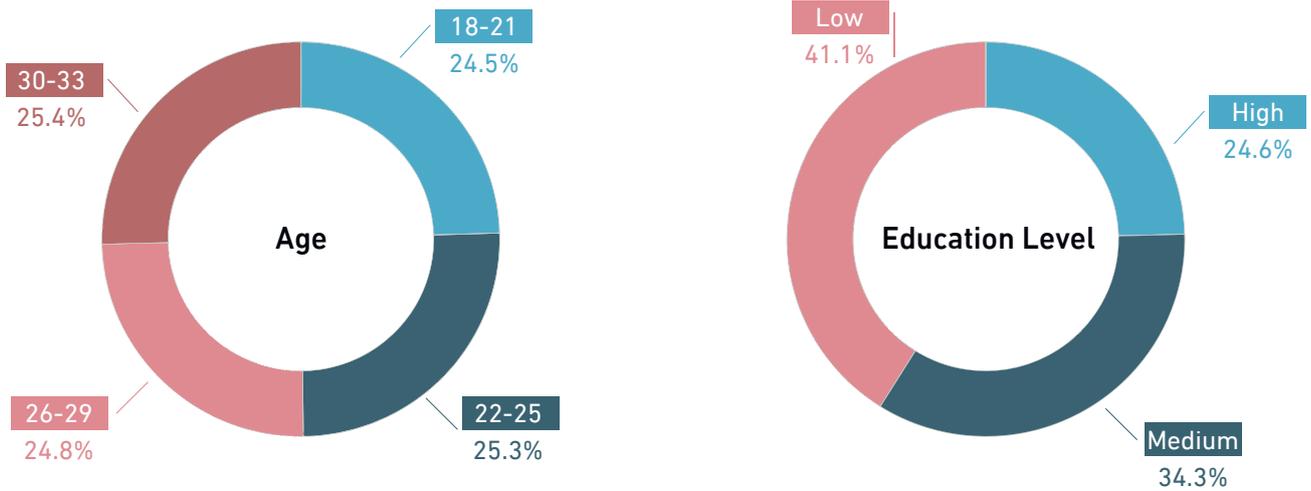
We selected one thousand participants as our research sample, using the quota sampling method.[6] We divided that sample into four sub-samples, representing the three main control areas inside Syria as well as the Syrian community in Turkey:

- Regime-controlled areas: The Government of Syria (GoS), which controls 63% of the area in the west, south, and middle of the country
- Opposition-controlled areas: those areas controlled by the National Army and Turkish-backed opposition forces in northern Aleppo governorate, and by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in NW Syria (Idlib governorate and western Aleppo governorate)
- Areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF, the Autonomous Administration area in NE Syria)
- Syrians in Turkey, the largest Syrian community in exile and where a substantial portion of Syrian political and civic institutions are based

This approach prioritized the political fragmentation in Syria more than the population density in each area. Since the political fragmentation has created several unique Syrian public spheres, each with its own rules and circumstances, the aim of this research is to understand youth participation context in each of these areas. Equal representation among the sub-samples allowed us to better form a comparative analysis between the areas and authorities.

Furthermore, the sample was responsive for some key social differences including gender, age group, education, and Ethnic/Cultural Background as shown below.

6- "Sampling in Primary Data Collection: Quota Sampling," Research Methodology, accessed January 20, 2022, https://research-methodology.net/sampling-in-primary-data-collection/quota-sampling/.

Age

- 18-21 — 24.5%
- 22-25 — 25.3%
- 26-29 — 24.8%
- 30-33 — 25.4%

Education Level

- Low — 41.1%
- High — 24.6%
- Medium — 34.3%

Sex/Gender

Female	Male
50.0%	50.0%

Place of Residence (data collection areas)

Istanbul

Gaziantep

A'zaz

Alraee

Ar Raqqah

Alqamishli

Idlib

SYRIA

Damascus

Rural Damascus

As-Sweida

Ethnic/Cultural Background

Arab	78.8%
Kurd	12.8%
Turkmen	8.4%
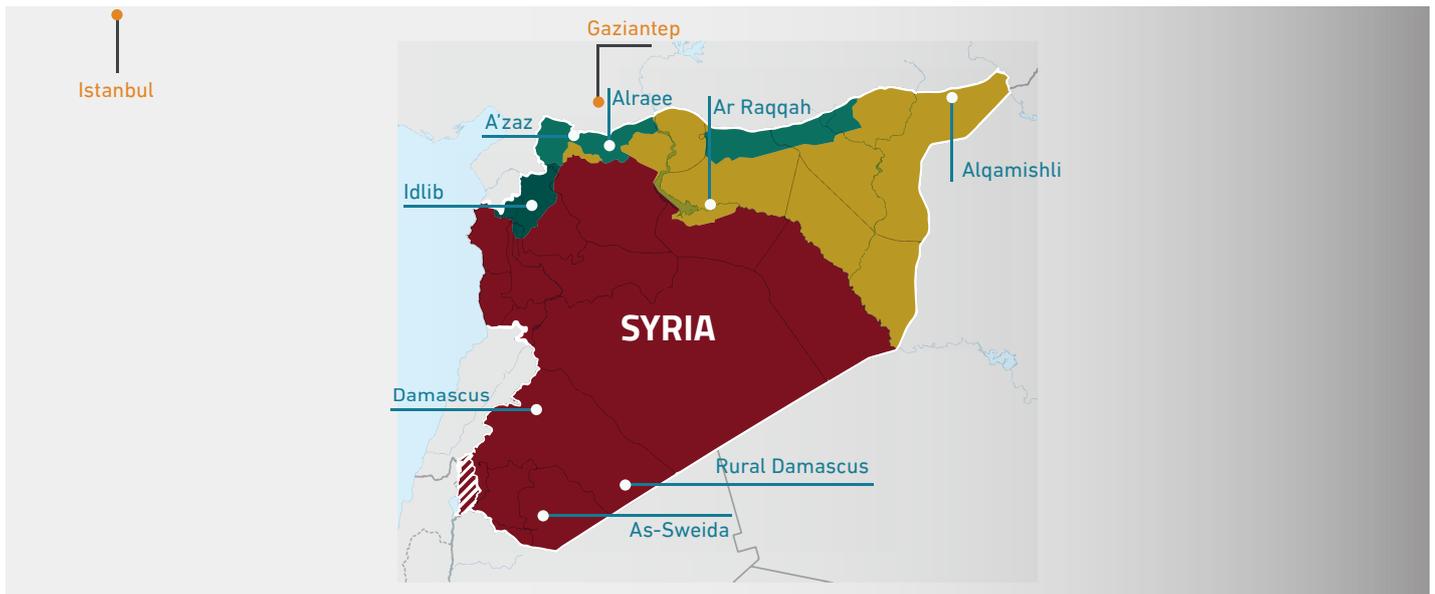
Figure 1: Characteristics of the research sample.

We do not claim that this sample statistically represents the complex youth community of Syria, but since there is no chance to conduct a standard randomized sampling, this approach is one of the best options we have to get an overall and comparatively in-depth understanding of Syrian youth after a decade of conflict.
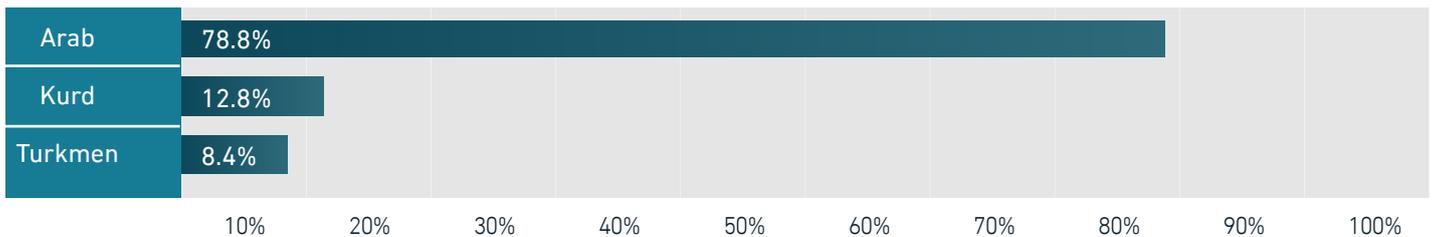
The survey-based quantitative approach adopted in this study includes some limitations. It is designed to explore the topic of interest and its key features without promising comprehensive answers which would require far more qualitative and quantitative research. The study revealed several areas where our results raise more questions than answers; our findings can be a foundation for further research.

In the analysis phase, we used SPSS to analyze and clean the data, and Power BI to build the interactive database. We worked on two analytical levels:

- An overall analysis of the total sample results, to read the general indicators
- A case-by-case comparative analysis of the sub-samples, to see if any variations exist between the researched areas

3. Conceptual Framework

In this study, we touch on some highly abstract notions, like "public sphere," and several concepts that can change with context, such as "youth." Accordingly, it is important to define each of these key concepts in a context-aware fashion and to present what we know from the literature in different countries.

Although the UN defines "youth" as those between the ages of 15 and 24,[7] that range was adjusted to 18-29 in the UN Security Council's Resolution 2250 concerning youth inclusion.[8]

Nevertheless, many Syrian studies use ages 18–39 as "youth."[9] While the UN's first definition is prevalent internationally, using it in a study that focuses specifically on the Syrian youth context would result in a sample where the oldest participant was only 14 when the conflict started. This could prevent us from understanding the overall picture of the youth/public sphere relationship; we would lose the perception of pre-/post-conflict. Conversely, following the local definition of up to 39 years old can take us away from genuine youth perceptions as defined globally.

7- "Youth," United Nations (United Nations), accessed January 4, 2022, https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth.

8- United Nations Security Council, sixty-ninth year, "Youth, Peace, and Security," S/RES.2250, December 9, 2015, 1, PDF, https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/413/06/PDF/N1541306.pdf?OpenElement .

9- For example, see Bassel Aloudat et al., "Syrian Youth: Perceptions of the Future," (in Arabic), Harmoon Center for Temporary Studies, June 15, 2020, https://bit.ly/3niRb5U.

Given these challenges, we chose an age range of 18–33 as our research community. This is not merely taking a middle position between local and international definitions of "youth;" rather, we're attempting to understand youth engagement within the context of the 11-year-long conflict while taking international and local contexts into account.

It is difficult to determine the exact size of this research community for two reasons: first, because of the rapid decline of Syria's national statistical capacity,[10] calculated by the World Bank, from 60 (out of 100) in 2011 to 22 in 2020;[11] and second, because of the dispersion of Syrians all over the world as a result of the conflict. However, we mitigate this issue by utilizing the last Syrian national census, conducted in 2004; at that time, the Syrian population was nearly 20 million, and 40% were under 15 years old (nearly 8 million).[12] A 15-year-old in 2004 is 33 today; a person born in 2004 is now 18. Both were in the target age group of our study.

It is worth mentioning that the exact number of Syrian youths under our definition is difficult to determine. On the one hand, national censuses count only resident population, not Syrians abroad, which are also targeted in this study. On the other hand, many youths have died or were forcibly disappeared before and during the conflict. Even so, youth still comprise a substantial part of the total Syrian population.

The other key concept we must define is the "public sphere," which is essentially a metaphorical term used to describe the virtual space—whether online or in-person—where people collectively act and interact.[13] For this study, we narrow that space to those places where people interact in relation to public affairs.

The term "public sphere" was first suggested in the early 1960s by German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who thought about it as the wide realm of our social life. He stated that "a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body."[14] Accordingly, Habermas' perception of the public sphere is not about a random group of individuals or any incidental crowd but more directed to the organizational aspect; in other words, any collective activity organized into a concrete form through the interaction of its participants.

10- Statistical Capacity is a nation's ability to collect, analyze, and disseminate high-quality data about its population and economy.

11- "Statistical Capacity Score (Overall Average) (Scale 0–100) - Syrian Arab Republic," The World Bank, accessed January 4, 2022, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IQ.SCI.OVRL?contextual=max&end=2020&locations=SY&start=2004&view=chart.

12- "General Census 2004," Syrian Arab Republic Central Bureau of Statistics, accessed January 4, 2022, http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2004/Syr2004A.htm.

13- Alan McKee, The Public Sphere: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

14- Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," New German Critique, no. 3 (1974): pp. 49-55, https://doi.org/10.2307/487737.

Using this background, the most common understanding of "public sphere" is the one suggested by the World Bank: "The public sphere is situated between private households on the one hand, and the state on the other. It is a space…[where] citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns."[15]

This definition could work perfectly for our research purposes, except for two points:

- The World Bank's definition focuses more on the communication facet of the public sphere than the activism facet.
- In Syria—where a decade of conflict has produced different control areas on the ground and melded the borders between state and non-state rulers—it is difficult to avoid some overlap between civic activism and what theoretically should be considered state-related activism. In some areas not controlled by the regime, civil society activists work in and with local governing institutions.

Consequently, and because the aim of this research is to capture and quantify youth engagement, activism must be included in our definition of "public sphere" for this study.

When talking about Syrian youth participation, we considered participation in any non-governmental and non-profit collective framework as participation in the public sphere. We included three domains of participation: community, civil society, and political domains.

4. Background: What Do We Know So Far About Syrian Youth?

Emma C. Murphy argued that "the widespread failure to foresee the Arab Spring uprising suggests we know less than we thought we did."[16] Drawing on that claim, she explains four major changes that took place in Arab countries over the last three decades which made the uprising possible and paved the way for the "arrival" of Arab youth on the political stage:

- Significant demographic shifts: the population has become substantially larger and younger
- A complete reversal of economic development strategies, from nationalist import substitution programs to neoliberal engagement in a global economy
- Populations have become progressively more educated, more mobile, and exposed as a result to a wider range of influences
- Family and extended social networks have become ever more important identifiers and sources of security, as the State has failed to manage those tasks

15- Communication for Governance & Accountability Program, "The Public Sphere," PDF, PubSphereWeb (archived from The World Bank, 2009), https://bit.ly/CommGap_PublicSpherePDF.

16- Emma C. Murphy, "Introduction: Arab Youth and Politics," Mediterranean Politics 17, no. 1 (2012): pp. 1-4, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.655042.

A. M. Kastrinou Theodoropulou explored youth activism in the Syrian capital of Damascus and tried to show the several ways in which young people have demonstrated activism, rather than the passivity often ascribed to them, and have done so in the twilight zones between state and society.[17] She conducted an ethnographic study within the setting of university life in Damascus and, through the example of a specific type of networking, concluded that young people reinforce, resist, and negotiate power relations in Syria.

But even though Theodoropulou's study was published about a year after the public uprising—where youth played a leading role—we see barely an echo of that massive youth movement in its results. For example, there is no mention of the local Youth Coordination Committees (YCC), created by youth all over Syria starting in March 2011 with the purpose of organizing to protest against the regime. It soon developed into the most common form of gathering and activism in fields such as media, humanitarian aid, and local governance, and gained a presence in almost all of the opposition political institutions.[18] The YCC movement accompanied and shaped the first rise of Syrian youth in the public sphere after being silent almost all their lives, and many of its leaders later participated in the emergence of the Syrian civil society domain.

The high wave of youth activism in public affairs dropped off gradually as the peaceful uprising turned into a violent conflict attracting rising numbers of internal and external actors. Militarization of protests has not only marginalized youth contributions in the public sphere, but has also highly impacted young people themselves.

A survey study published by The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2021 revealed that among the 1,400 young Syrians surveyed, 80% had experienced periods of no or very limited access to basic necessities. Two-thirds were forced to leave their homes and live elsewhere, more than half had to interrupt their education, and more than 40% had a member of their immediate family or a close friend who was killed.[19]

In addition, according to a paper published by The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Syrian young people appear indifferent to formal political participation and elite-level peacebuilding processes; they share a distinct perception of lost political agency and no longer being an active part of the process, of being replaced by the interests of outside players. The international narrative is usually dominated by Syria's various national strategies, not by the realities faced by youth and their own visions for their future.[20]

17- A. M. Kastrinou Theodoropoulou, "A Different Struggle for Syria: Becoming Young in the Middle East," Mediterranean Politics 17, no. 1 (2012): pp. 59-76, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2012.655046.

18- "Local Coordination Committees in Syria" (in Arabic), Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed January 5, 2022, https://carnegie-mec.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50432.

19- "Millions of Young Syrians Paid Heavy Toll During 'Decade of Loss,'" International Committee of the Red Cross, March 25, 2021, https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-millions-young-syrians-paid-heavy-toll-during-decade-savage-loss.

20- "Assessing What Meaningful Syrian Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding Looks like in Practice: Policy Dialogue Report," Arab Reform Initiative, November 30, 2021, https://bit.ly/ARI_Syrian_Youth_in_Peacebuilding.

The ARI paper states that the lack of employment and livelihood opportunities for youth, resulting from the destruction of the Syrian economy, has required that youth prioritize their own daily needs for income generation over other forms of civic or political engagement. Likewise, the lack of physical security and the fragmented political space act as barriers to various forms of participation in the public sphere.[21] The crisis has created an environment where trust is largely absent and where youth limit their participation and engagement in the public sphere as much as possible.

Finally, the ARI paper argues that engaging young people in political processes cannot be approached as a one-time project; it must be an ongoing endeavor. The biggest challenge is to create sustainable programming within an environment where most funding is short-term. Likewise, local organizations play a critical role in youth programming, but receive less than 1% of international funding and are treated as passive recipients of international funds.[22]

Lynn Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel focused on other factors influencing youth activism in the Arab world in their review of youth and the geopolitics of civic engagement in the "Arab Awakening."[23]

They argue that long-standing international efforts to influence Arab youth movements and their leaders have embedded values and practices associated with European and American views about democracy. They raise the question of youth movement authenticity,[24] building on political commentators' frequent point that many of the alleged leaders of the uprisings had lived outside their countries for extended periods of time—often for education at Western universities. From our perspective, we assert that Staeheli and Nagel overstated the roles of outside factors on Arab youth activism while downplaying internal factors such as the regime's dictatorship, rampant corruption, and widespread inequality.

Our study will explore, identify, and compare Syrian youth activism in eight different cities inside Syria, as well as within the Syrian youth community in Turkey, with a focus on:

- assessing the level of public sphere engagement for each area
- exploring the various forms and nature of that engagement
- trying to make sense of the Syrian youth attitude toward social, civil, and political participation, including both motivations and obstacles

We hope our contribution will offer a better understanding of the overall complexities of youth engagement in Syria's public sphere, and the internal variations between different control areas and local contexts.

21- "Assessing What Meaningful Syrian Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding Looks like in Practice."

22- "Assessing What Meaningful Syrian Youth Inclusion in Peacebuilding Looks like in Practice."

23- Lynn Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel, "Whose Awakening Is It? Youth and the Geopolitics of Civic Engagement in the 'Arab Awakening,'" European Urban and Regional Studies 20, no. 1 (2013): pp. 115-119, https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776412460536.

24- This is the exact term used by the authors, similar to originality—to what extent the Arab Spring movement is an original product of Arab communities. See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authenticity/.

5. Findings

In the following sections, we present our findings through four key themes, as outlined in the methodological approach. First, we tackle youth interest in the public sphere (i.e., public affairs) and their perceptions toward it, as interest is the initial foundation for any potential engagement. Second, we show the data regarding the level of actual engagement. Third, we focus on youth's self-reported perceptions of their influence in the public sphere. Finally, we focus on how accessible current youth empowerment programs are, and what types of interventions this study would recommend to improve their efficacy.

5.1 Interest and Perceptions

5.1.1 Youth interest in the public sphere

Because interest in public affairs is an essential foundation for any potential engagement, we tried to capture this variable using two approaches: we asked the research participants directly to describe their interest in the public sphere, and we examined a set of factual indicators that indirectly reflect interest levels, such as awareness regarding the overall Syrian context.

The first approach reveals that about 16% of our research participants self-reported "high interest" in public affairs; a slightly smaller percentage (15.7%) described their interest as "very limited." Most respondents fell in the middle with a slight tendency toward not being interested; nearly 36% chose "limited interest," and 32% chose "fair interest."

In other words, our data show that nearly half of our total sample (48.8%) perceive themselves as interested in the public sphere. Since there is no comparable global data about youth interest in public affairs in other countries or other war contexts, we cannot make a firm assessment about whether this rate is comparatively high or low. But because it is higher than youth turnout in the last European election (2019), which was around 45%,[25] we speculate that our data suggests a reasonable level of youth interest in the public sphere.

But the data also show a notable variation among the sub-samples of different control areas inside Syria and also for Syrian youth in Turkey. The lowest level of self-reported interest came from respondents in regime-controlled areas: only 13% expressed a "high" level of interest, while 22% expressed a "very limited" interest. We compare these results with youth in opposition- and SDF-controlled areas, where 19% for both areas were "high" interest and participants who chose "very limited interest" were 12% in opposition areas and 14% in SDF areas.

This difference could be attributed to the varied overall context of these regions—especially the governing authorities in each region. Accepting the fact that the Syrian regime is still responsible for the biggest share of human rights violations in Syria,[26] it follows that areas controlled by the Assad regime are the riskiest places for youth activism. This doesn't mean that politically-based violence doesn't occur in opposition and SDF areas; it simply means it's less oppressive than in regime areas.

25- "The 2019 Post-Electoral Survey: Have the 2019 European Elections Entered a New Dimension?" PDF, European Parliament, 2019, accessed February 4, 2022,
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019-european-elections-entered-a-new-dimension , 23.
26- "Eleventh Annual Report: The Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in 2021," PDF, Syrian Network for Human Rights, January 21, 2022, https://sn4hr.org/blog/2022/01/21/57255/, 16-17.

Participants from Syrian communities in Turkey were in the middle regarding their interest in the public sphere: 16% reported "high" interest and 15% reported "very limited" interest. But the combined amount of "high" and "fair" interest among participants from this sub-sample was nearly 46%. This is a substantial rate when we consider that it is for a youth segment in exile. However, we tend to associate this result with the fact that Turkey hosts the vast majority of Syrian political and civil society organizations in exile. The existence of these bodies, and the dynamic they create, are expected to offer Syrians in Turkey more exposure to Syrian public affairs.

It is also worth mentioning that the interest level was much higher among male respondents compared with female; 58% of males reported "high" and "fair" interest, while the rate was 40% among females. While gender-based analysis isn't a key theme for this study, we will refer to variations between males and females where it is most relevant in the context of this study, simply to provide a starting point for further research.

Self-Reported Level of Interest

Location

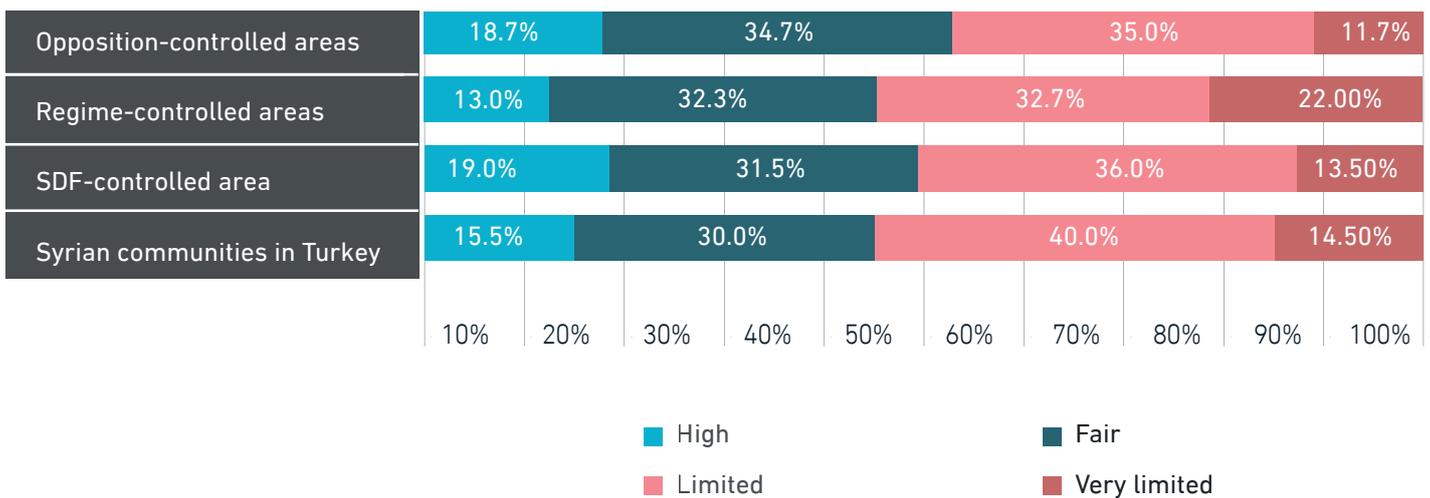| Location	High	Fair	Limited	Very limited
Opposition-controlled areas	18.7%	34.7%	35.0%	11.7%
Regime-controlled areas	13.0%	32.3%	32.7%	22.00%
SDF-controlled area	19.0%	31.5%	36.0%	13.50%
Syrian communities in Turkey	15.5%	30.0%	40.0%	14.50%

Legend: High | Fair | Limited | Very limited

Figure 2: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their self-reported level of interest in the public sphere.

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In addition to the direct question about self-reported interest level, we used respondents' awareness regarding several public-sphere issues as a second indicator of their interest. The basis of this question is the premise that a person is unlikely to be well informed on something about which they have no interest and, conversely, is unlikely to be interested in something about which they are not at least partially informed.

We asked respondents to describe their awareness regarding five general and relevant issues on a five-point Likert scale: the political negotiations process; the control maps; the general conditions in other regions of Syria; the general conditions of Syrians in other countries; and the activities of humanitarian and civil society organizations. From these five self-reported facets, we extrapolated one indicator to measure each respondent's overall level of awareness regarding the general context of Syria.

We see from this indicator that about 21% of the full sample self-reported being "well informed," while nearly 18% seem "not informed at all." We also notice a clear tendency toward being less informed; more than 35% chose "minimally informed" as opposed to 26% who are "somewhat informed." This result seems in line with the direct question results: 40–50% of our participants are at least moderately interested in and at least moderately informed about the public sphere.

We also find a notable variation in the level of context awareness depending on the control area. Respondents from SDF control areas appear to be the most context-aware overall; 27% of this sub-sample reported being "well informed" about Syrian public affairs. The next highest percentage live in opposition areas, where slightly more than 21% reported being "well informed." Although "well informed" respondents in regime-controlled areas mirror those figures somewhat (20%), a larger gap exists between sub-sample participants who reported being "not informed at all." That figure in regime-controlled areas was 22%, compared with only 13% and 10% in opposition and SDF areas, respectively.

On the other hand, while Syrian youth in Turkey reported high levels of interest high levels of interest in Syrian public affairs, their numbers were lower in terms of being informed. In this sub-sample, around 26% of respondents were "not informed at all," and only 17% considered themselves "well informed" on the five-question average scale described earlier.

In short, our data suggest that Syrian youth, in general, are fairly interested in the public sphere. If we order the four sub-sample areas according to the strength of the connection between youth and public affairs in each, in terms of interest as well as awareness, a pattern emerges: participants from SDF areas come first, followed by opposition and then regime control areas, and youth in Turkey come last.

It is worth mentioning that because we are studying this topic within the context of an ongoing conflict, political fragmentation, and social disintegration, interest and awareness may not necessarily result in activism at the present time. In this case, the measurement of interest can tell us more than the measurement of actual participation; it may well be that the first points toward the percentage of youth who would become engaged in the public sphere in the absence of all those obstacles.

Average Level of Awareness Regarding Public Affairs in Syria

Place of Residence

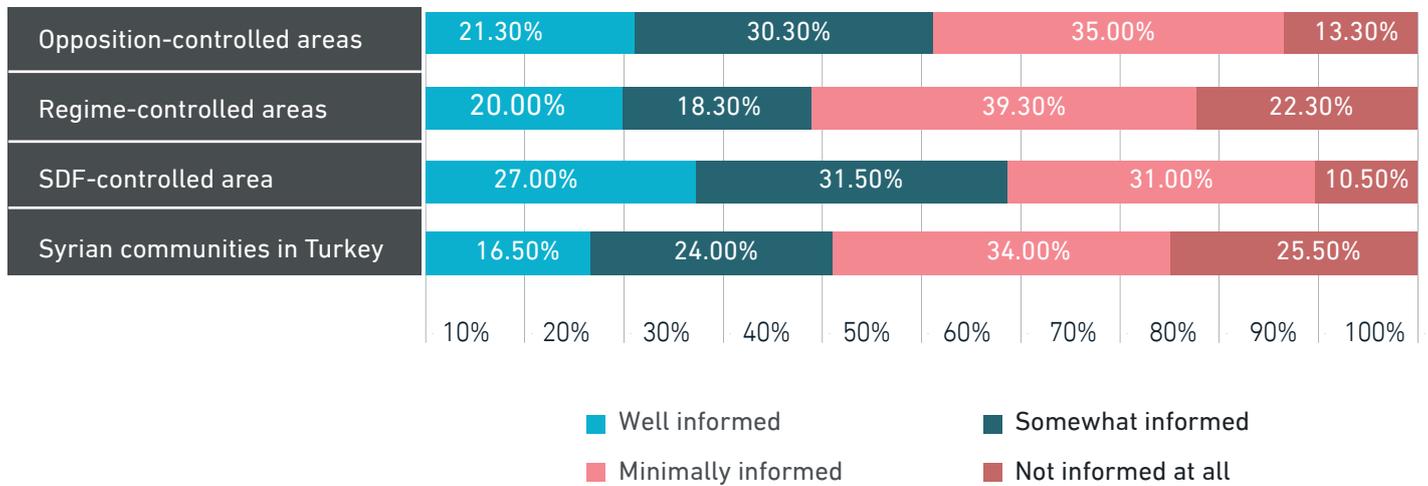|	Well informed	Somewhat informed	Minimally informed	Not informed at all
Opposition-controlled areas	21.30%	30.30%	35.00%	13.30%
Regime-controlled areas	20.00%	18.30%	39.30%	22.30%
SDF-controlled area	27.00%	31.50%	31.00%	10.50%
Syrian communities in Turkey	16.50%	24.00%	34.00%	25.50%

Figure 3: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of awareness regarding the general context of Syria. The five issues queried are the political negotiations process; the control maps; the general conditions in other regions of Syria; the general conditions of Syrians in other countries; and the activities of humanitarian and civil society organizations.

The last point that can enrich the context here is about youth familiarity with UNSC Resolution 2250, which calls for enhancing youth participation in peacebuilding processes. We found that nearly 5% of the participants said they are "well informed" about this resolution. The rate was higher in SDF and regime areas (8% and 7%) and much lower in opposition areas and in Turkey (3% and 4%). However, as the resolution is almost never referred to in the media and is not taught in Syrian curricula, the rate of 5% may simply be a function of respondents unwilling to admit their lack of knowledge of it.

Although this point of awareness is not part of the Syrian local context, having a substantial portion of the sample saying they don't know about such a relevant resolution refers to a tight limitation on Syrian youth's awareness of the international context that surrounds their crisis.

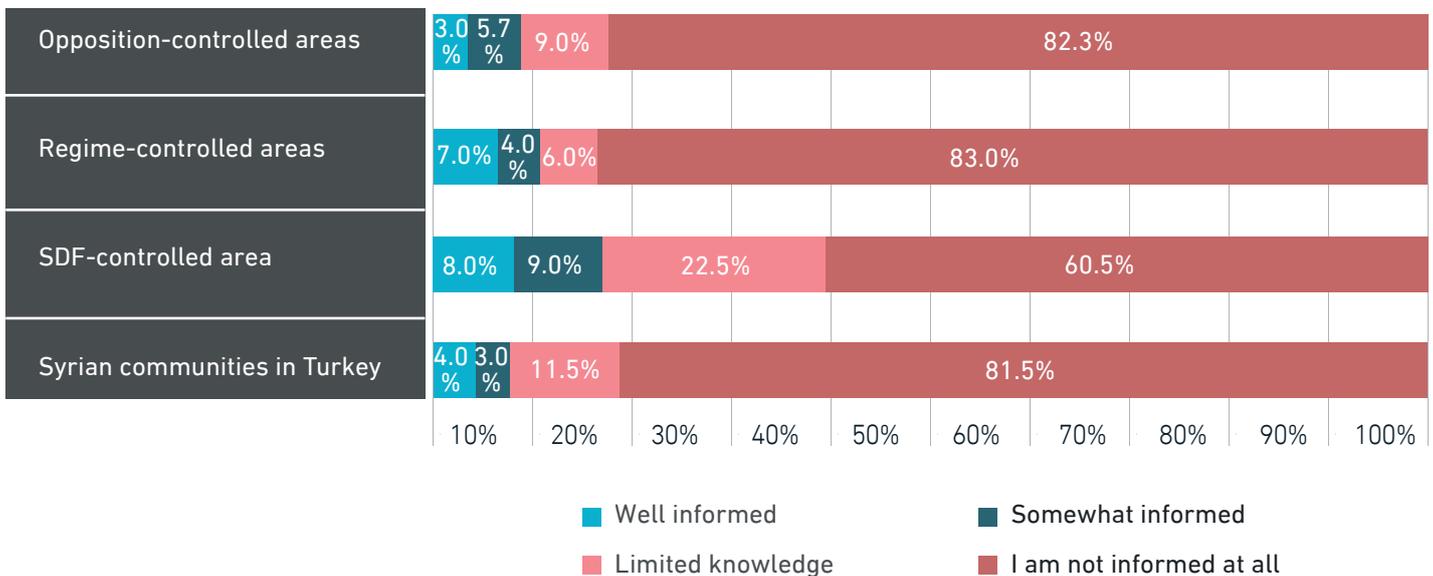**How informed are you about the provisions of UNSC Resolution 2250 on Youth?**

Opposition-controlled areas	3.0% / 5.7% / 9.0% / 82.3%
Regime-controlled areas	7.0% / 4.0% / 6.0% / 83.0%
SDF-controlled area	8.0% / 9.0% / 22.5% / 60.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	4.0% / 3.0% / 11.5% / 81.5%

Legend:
- Well informed
- Somewhat informed
- Limited knowledge
- I am not informed at all

Figure 4: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of and familiarity with UNSC Resolution 2250.

5.1.2 Youth perceptions of the public sphere

To better understand the impact of the context, let's look at the perceptions of the research participants toward public affairs: how do they conceptualize their relationship with the public sphere?

We gave participants four descriptions of attitudes toward participation in public affairs and asked each to choose the description nearest to their own perceptions; we included an "Other" option so that participants could further personalize their answer if they wished. Our offered descriptions were that participation is a civic duty to perform, a right to be attained, or a stressful or risky area. We note that this is not a sociometric question; rather an attempt at gauging how Syrian youth feel about the public sphere.

In the overall results of our survey, three of the four options occurred at a similar frequency, between 26% and 29% for each. The highest percentage (29%) viewed the public sphere as "a stressful area best avoided." Not far behind was the view that participation in public affairs is a "civic duty" at 28%. The view of public sphere participation as a right that one should strive to attain came third with 26% of respondents; another 15% of the sample described participation as "a risky endeavor with consequences." Less than 2% used the fifth option (Other), but most of this group chose not to give an alternate answer.

The most interesting results show up when we compare answers between the residence sub-samples. For example, the perception among youth in regime areas that participation in the public sphere is a right was slightly lower than in other areas, 23% compared with 26–28% in the other control areas. Perceptions that participation comes with substantial risks is also higher among regime-area youth (22%) and among Syrian youth in Turkey (19%), compared with 10% in both the opposition and SDF areas.

Another example is the wide gap in SDF-area youth perceptions that participation in public affairs is their "civic duty." Fourteen percentage points separate SDF-area respondents (42%) from the next largest group to choose this option (regime-area youth at 27%). Syrian youth respondents living in opposition areas chose "civic duty" at 26%, and those living in Turkey at 16%. This option reflects youth commitment to their communities when it is prioritized, but it raises an interesting question. It's entirely understandable that Syrian youth in Turkey might not consider Syrian public affairs a civic duty when they're not living in Syria, but why would the figure be so much higher in SDF areas? One possible explanation could be the dominant socialist ideology of the Democratic Union Party, the leading party in the SDF control area, which, in principle, prioritizes the interest of the community over individuals.

There are also notable results when looking at this issue through an ethnic lens, recognized in the sample as between Kurds and Arabs in SDF areas, and between Turkmen and Arabs in opposition areas. The most notable variation in the SDF area was the number of Arab respondents who marked participation in the public sphere as a "risky endeavor," a much higher response rate than Kurdish respondents (17% for Arabs, 2% for Kurds). In the opposition areas, the widest variation appeared among those who marked participation as a "civic duty;" nearly 33% of Turkmen respondents called it so, while the rate was 24% among Arab respondents.
(See the interactive database here.)

Syrian youth are also not blind to the fact that the Syrian public sphere is a stressful place, given all that is still occurring. It is interesting, though, to see that the highest percentages of respondent perception as "a stressful area best avoided" (35%) are in both opposition areas and in Turkey, rather than in regime areas (24%). SDF area respondents chose the option of "a stressful area best avoided" at a rate of 23%. Although our quantitative data alone can't explain the exact cause of these variations, those data can still give us a sketch of how stressful the public sphere can be for youth in each of these areas.

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For you, what does participation in the public sphere mean?

Place of Residence
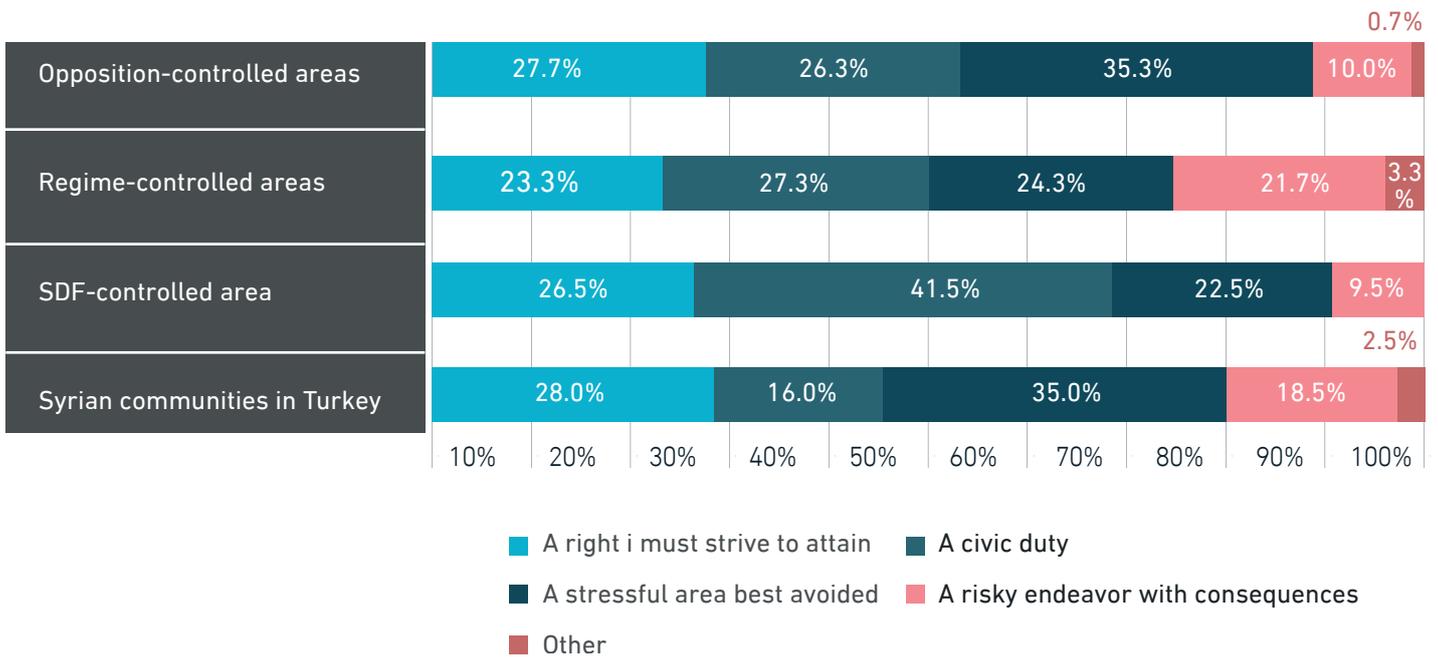
Figure 5: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their personal attitude toward the public sphere.

Regarding gender variations: although we couldn't find significant differences between males and females in our sample, in general female participants tended to see the public sphere as "risky" and "stressful" more than male respondents, who viewed the issue as a "duty" first, then as a "right."

5.1.3. Attitudes about youth participation in the public sphere

As another way to explore youth perceptions toward the public sphere, we offered a set of five statements about ideas common in the region concerning the role of young people in public affairs, asking participants to express their agreement with, rejection of, or neutrality concerning each statement. We believe each of these common ideas reflects an aspect of Syrian youths' relationship to the public sphere, and present our findings here.

The first common idea presented was that young people should take care of their own families and careers and not worry about anything beyond that. That the majority of respondents in all areas (about 56% of the total sample) rejected this idea is a good indicator of their willingness to engage in the public sphere. But nearly 25% of the sample agreed, clearly suggesting that deep ruptures do exist.

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Of particular note is the variation between control areas regarding this question—and where it is remarkably the same. Figure 5 demonstrates that nearly 38% of our youth respondents living in regime areas agreed with the idea. This was the highest percentage of agreement, followed by the sub-sample living in Turkey (28%). Opposition-area respondents came third at 21%, while only 7% of youth respondents in SDF areas agreed.

It is worth noting here that the same pattern from the interest question emerges here in the perception one; the four studied areas can be ordered according to the positivity of youth perceptions toward the public sphere (indicated by disagreement with the statement), from highest in SDF control areas, followed by opposition areas, then regime areas, and finally the least positivity from the sub-sample in Turkey.

But of equal—and hopeful—note is that for every sub-sample group, the percentage of respondents who flatly disagreed with the statement that they should stick to their families and jobs and stay out of public affairs was over half, ranging from 52% among those living in Turkey to 63% among those living in SDF areas.

Position on the statement: "Young people should take care of their careers and families and not think about anything outside of that."

Place of Residence

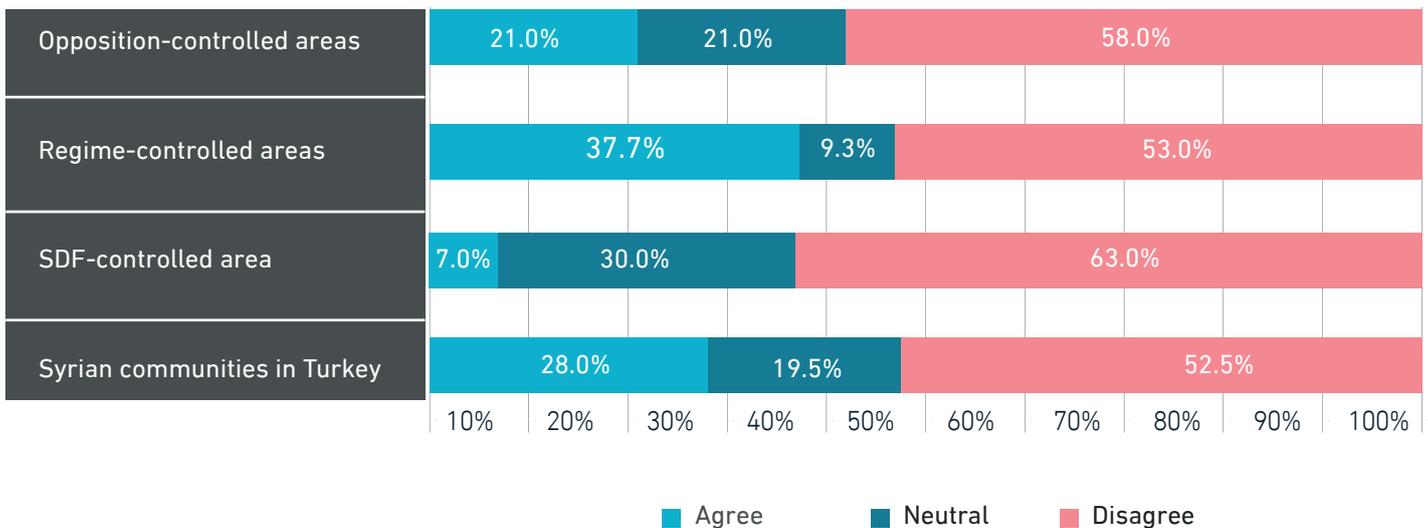|	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Opposition-controlled areas	21.0%	21.0%	58.0%
Regime-controlled areas	37.7%	9.3%	53.0%
SDF-controlled area	7.0%	30.0%	63.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	28.0%	19.5%	52.5%

Figure 6: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

5.1.4 Current restrictions on youth participation

We asked respondents about their position on the common idea that what is currently happening in Syria is beyond the youth's ability to influence it. Overall, nearly half the sample agreed that right now there isn't much young Syrians can do. Less than 28% flatly rejected the idea.

While opposition, regime, and Turkey area respondents largely agreed with this statement, from 43% in Turkey to almost 68% in regime areas—reflecting an alarming level of frustration—respondents in SDF-controlled areas agreed at only 27%, with another 24% holding a "neutral" position to the statement. Likewise, respondents who flatly disagreed with the statement drew low percentages in opposition (24%), regime (20%), and Turkey (22%) sub-samples. But not in the SDF sub-sample: nearly half of SDF-area respondents flatly disagreed that there is nothing they can do in the current situation.

These numbers don't necessarily say anything about youth abilities or skills to effect change; rather, they indicate youth perceptions about the current conditions and nature of the conflict, and about the possibility of any significant change on the horizon.

Position on the statement: "What is happening in Syria is beyond the youth's ability to influence it."

Place of Residence

Place of Residence	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Opposition-controlled areas	48.3%	27.7%	24.0%
Regime-controlled areas	67.7%	12.0%	20.3%
SDF-controlled area	27.0%	24.5%	48.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	43.0%	34.5%	22.5%

Figure 7: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

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5.1.5 Self-esteem

The public uprising in Syria, which witnessed the prominent presence of youth movements for the first time in Syria's modern history, hasn't gone well so far, which left a lot of youth frustrated. One criticism often raised about these youth movements was that they couldn't maintain collective activism. We asked the youth in our sample about this statement and found that 20% of the full sample agreed with it, but 54% flatly rejected it.

Focusing on the sub-sample groups, the percentages of respondents in agreement with the statement ranged from 20–26%, except in SDF areas where it fell to less than 4%. In fact, respondents in SDF areas categorically rejected the statement with a strong 77% disagreement. These numbers may suggest that young people there have higher self-esteem when it comes to working collectively. Furthermore, there was no significant variation between the responses of the ethnic groups in SDF areas; Arab and Kurdish survey participants disagreed with this statement at nearly the same rate.

Another interesting result came from respondents in opposition-controlled areas, where the lowest rate of disagreement occurred (43%). This gap could be explained simply by the population changes that have taken[27] place there; about half of the current population in opposition areas are internally displaced persons (IDPs). The lack of social homogeneity caused by a decade of ongoing displacement waves in this region may make it more difficult for youth to imagine themselves acting collectively.

Position on the statement: "Experience has proven that young people are unable to work collectively and in an orderly fashion."

Place of Residence
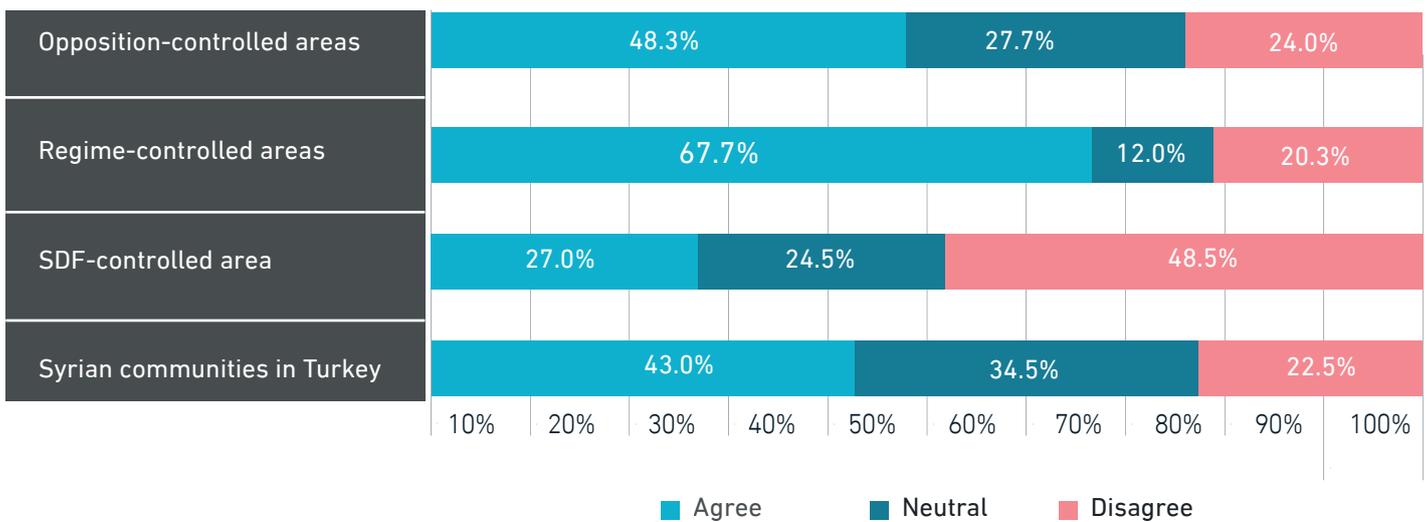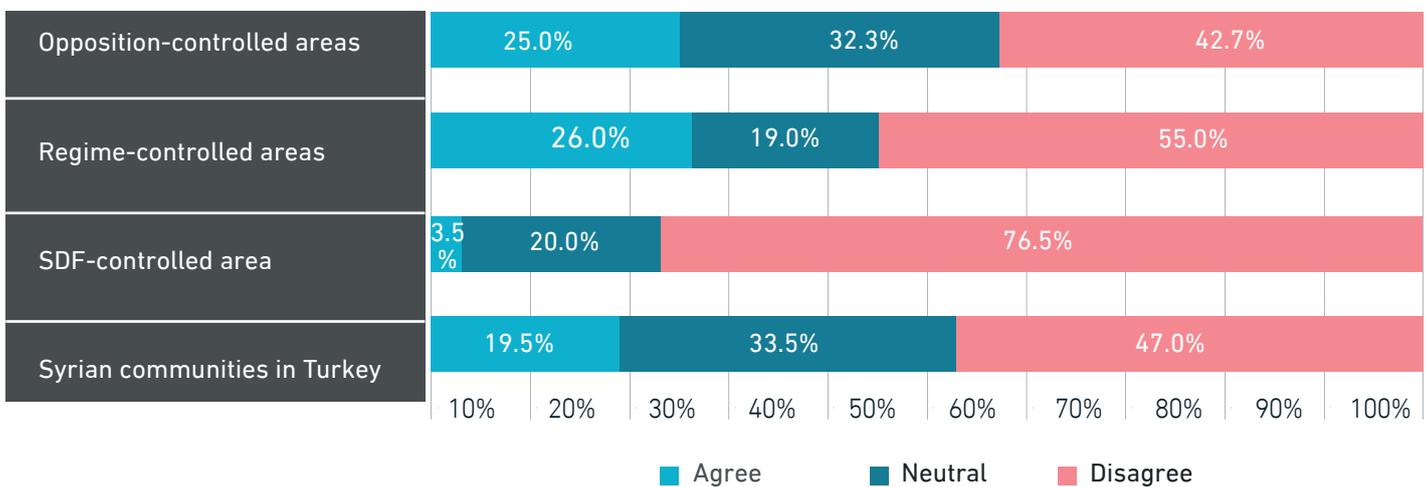

Figure 8: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

27- Response Coordination Group, "Demographics in NW Syria," Twitter post (photo 2), December 28, 2020, 12:03 AM, accessed February 7, 2022, https://twitter.com/group_response/status/1343467607551258624/photo/2.

5.1.6 Intergenerational relationships

To what extent do youth in Syria feel the need to listen to older generations? Exploring this issue in our study sheds some light on perceptions of any gap between youth and older generations. At the full sample level, our data suggest that intergenerational relationships aren't in any particular crisis, since nearly 44% of the sample agreed that young people should listen to older generations. This, along with the rate of neutrality toward the statement (24%), exceeds the rate of disagreement (32%), though not by a particularly wide gap. But we can infer that the majority of sample participants don't really consider themselves in generational conflict.

There are some notable differences among the residence sub-samples. Generational compatibility appears dominant in opposition areas; only 17% of participants rejected this statement outright, while more than half (51%) agreed with it. Respondents from regime areas and Syrian communities in Turkey fell in the middle, with 47% and 40% agreement, respectively. The highest dissent was in SDF areas, where only 30% of respondents agreed that youth should listen to their elders in matters of public affairs (close to the "neutral" rate of 26%) and 44% disagreed.

Of course, looking at intergenerational relationships through a one-question lens is not enough to yield any comprehensive conclusions; we included this statement simply to offer a glance into this important aspect of youth engagement in the public sphere.

> **Position on the statement: "Young people have energy, but they lack wisdom; they should listen to older generations."**

Place of Residence

Figure 9: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

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5.1.7 A shared belief

We asked our participants to respond to one statement that is, for the moment at least, more hypothetical: if Syria were to enter a kind of stability, would Syrian youth be able to play an important role again? Our purpose was less fact-checking than it was an attempt to gain a feel for the collective self-image of Syrian youth after the harsh experiences of the last decade.

We found wide acceptance for this statement across the sample, as well as in each of the four sub-samples. The overall rate of agreement was 62%, with the weakest rate of agreement in opposition areas (54%). Opposition areas also had the highest rate of flat rejection at 13%. But as Figure 10 shows, every sub-sample area showed over half of the respondents in agreement and very few in outright disagreement.

Despite ten years of suffering, marginalization, and frustration, the majority of the Syrian young people we spoke with still believe they can play an important role in their country's future. And as long as they believe, they hope for a brighter Syrian future and, at the first opportunity, are more likely to rise up and work to make it a reality.

Position on the statement: "Young people have played important roles when given the opportunity, and will get back to work when they have the opportunity again."

Place of Residence

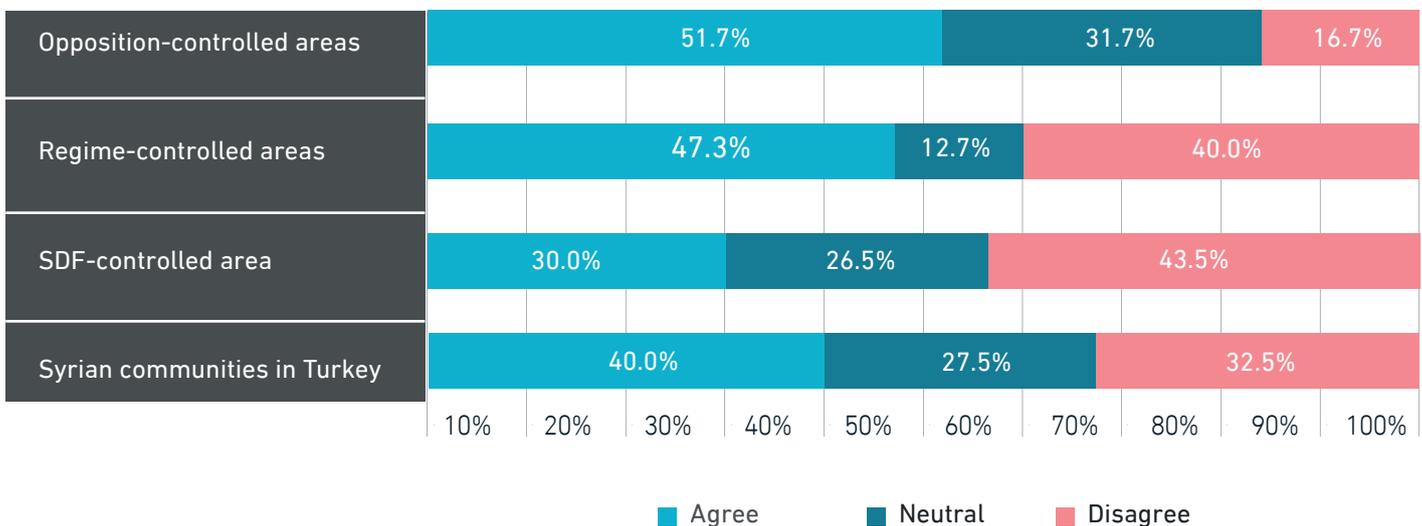

Figure 10: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

5.1.8 The boundaries between private and public affairs

There is no doubt that what happens in any community's public sphere affects its individuals, but what do the youth in our sample think about that? To what extent do they feel that public affairs are affecting their lives regardless of their interest in or indifference toward it?

At the full-sample level, 57% of respondents agreed with the statement; but surprisingly, regime-area respondents expressed the highest rate of agreement at more than 83%. The next highest percentage of agreement was among respondents in opposition areas at only 56%, while in SDF areas agreement did not exceed 27%.

Position on the statement: "There are no boundaries between public and private affairs; what happens outside home affects us in the end."

Place of Residence

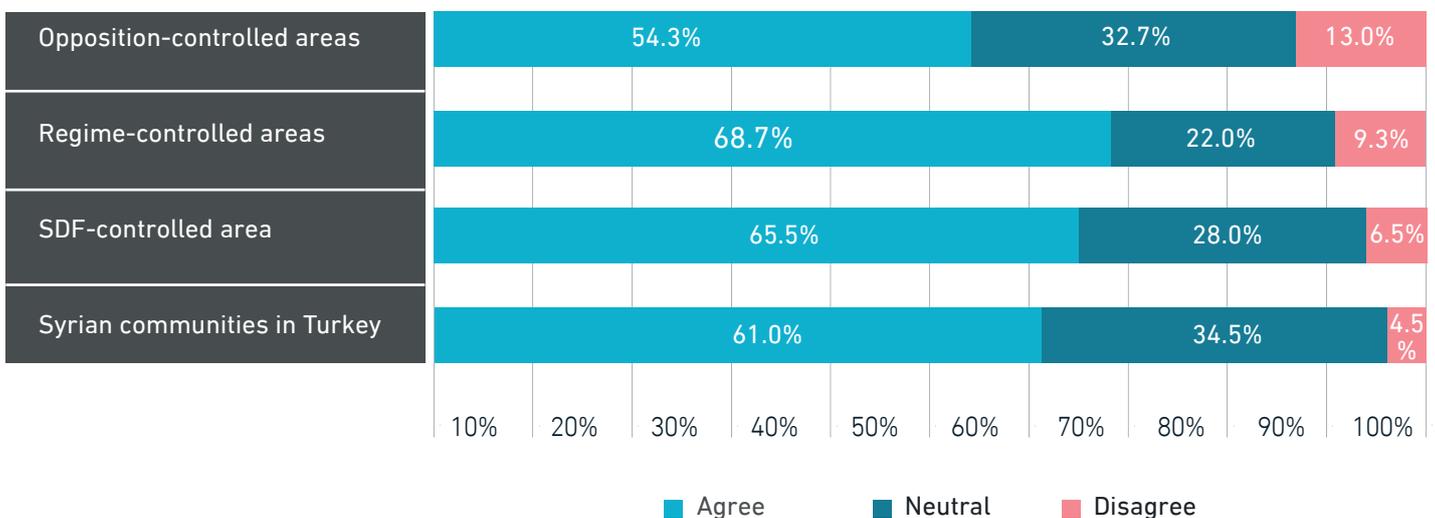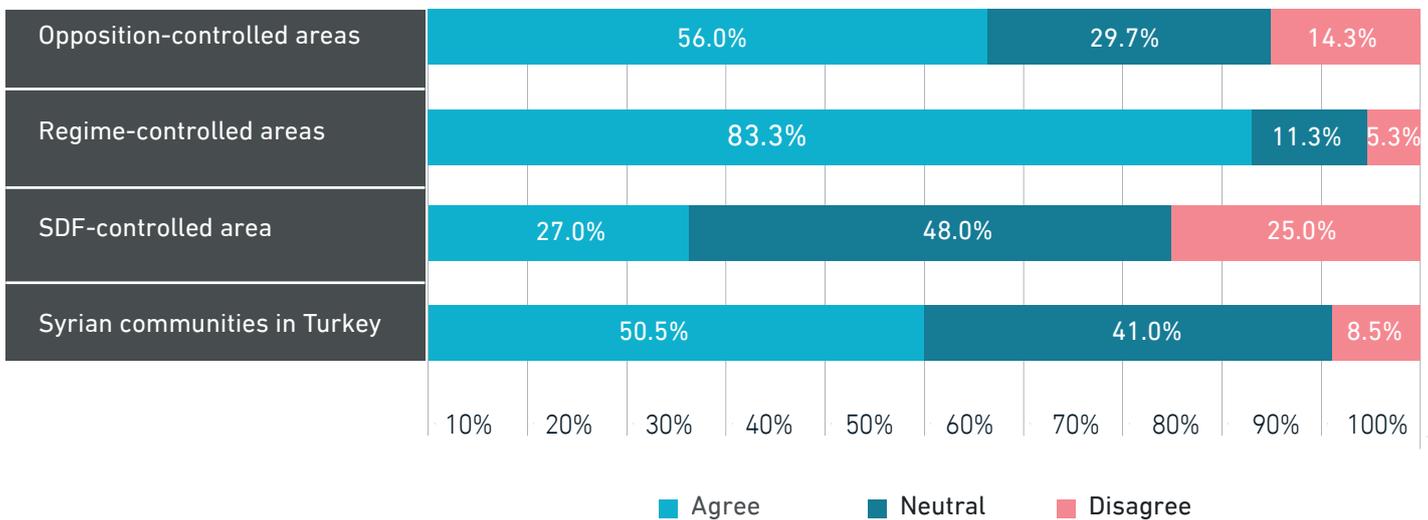

Figure 11: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of agreement with the statement.

5.2. Engagement: Youth Connectivity with Collective Action Groups

It is difficult to get reliable indicators about youth public-sphere engagement in any community, mainly because the concept of "engagement" is complicated. It is not limited to the formal shapes of engagement like elections or political parties; there are many forms of informal participation, which appear to more readily attract youth populations around the world.[28] Anna Lührmann offers an example in her 2013 report for the United Nations Development Programme: "Youth...tend to get involved in civic, service-oriented activities, such as volunteering for a social cause. Many young people are more inclined to join a tree-planting project, for example, than to join a political party talking about planting trees in the future."[29]

But the mission is much more difficult when the topic is Syria, because even the regular indicators of formal participation are not comprehensive in the context of ongoing war and political fragmentation. The overall social, civic, and political atmosphere are, naturally, different from a regular peacetime one.

To address this challenge, we designed our approach to cover a wide spectrum of formal and informal engagement. We asked our sample participants if they are, or have ever been, members or participants in any collective frameworks involved with public-sphere issues. We asked about five domains of collective frameworks:

- Political parties or movements
- Local government institutions
- Humanitarian or civil society organizations
- Career or student unions/associations
- Volunteer teams or campaigns

These collective frameworks cover political, civic, and social engagement. As such, this exploration is informative not only for insights and numbers about the rates of youth engagement with collective frameworks, but also for indicating levels of youth organizing and any levels of disengagement from such frameworks.

As an overall assessment, we found that 64% of the youth we surveyed were not engaged with any of these frameworks. The next paragraphs will shed light on some details.

28- Anna Lührmann, "Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle: A Good Practice Guide," PDF (United Nations Development Programme, 2013), accessed February 9, 2022,

https://www.undp.org/publications/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-electoral-cycle .

29- Lührmann, "Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle," 3.

5.2.1 Political parties or movements

We were somewhat shocked with the results regarding Syrian youth engagement with political parties or movements; nearly 89% of the sample said they are not and have never been members or participants in any political party or movement. The rate increases to 93% if we add the 4% who said they were engaged in the past but left during the conflict.

In fact, less than 4% of young people we surveyed were members of or participants in any political party or movement. Although it is a global fact that young populations are less represented in political organizations,[30] the situation in Syria is more critical; the country is in the midst of a difficult transitional period and needs effective political actors going forward.

In line with our sub-sample results for interest in the public sphere, the highest level of youth engagement in political parties or movements was in SDF areas (although even there it was only 7%); the lowest was with youth living in Syrian communities in Turkey at 0.5%. Political engagement in opposition-controlled areas was 3%, and nearly 4% in regime areas. The modest peak in SDF-controlled areas can be attributed to the large Kurdish population there, which has historically formed an incubator for ethnic-based political movement since the establishment of the Syrian state.[31]

However, the most interesting result on the sub-sample level was among those who were once active but now are not; the highest percentage here was among youth in regime-controlled areas at almost 9%.

Youth Engagement with Political Parties or Movements

Area	Yes, and I still do	Yes, but not currently	No	Prefer not to answer
Opposition-controlled areas	2.7%	3.0%	89.7%	4.7%
Regime-controlled areas	4.3%	8.7%	86.7%	0.3%
SDF-controlled area	1.5%	7.0%	82.0%	9.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	0.5%	2.5%	97.0%	

Legend:
- Yes, and I still do
- Yes, but not currently
- No
- Prefer not to answer
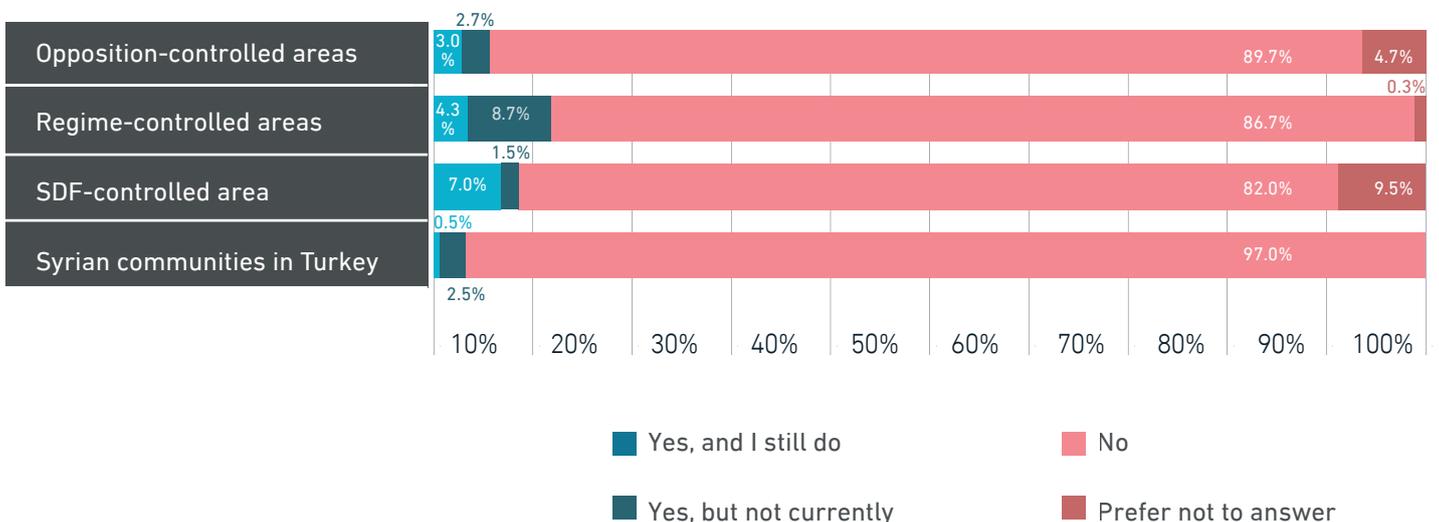
Figure 12: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their engagement with political parties or movements.

30- Lührmann, "Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle," 3.

31- Hoshang Osey, "Kurdish Political and Civic Life in Syria 1898-2017" (in Arabic), PDF, Qalamoon Journal, no. 2 (2017): p. 43, https://doi.org/https://bit.ly/Harmoon_org_Kurdish_Political_Civic_Life_Syria_1898-2017_PDF.

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In short, the vast majority of youth respondents are not linked to any political frameworks, and the percentage of disengagement from such frameworks is slightly higher than that of respondents who are currently engaged. These numbers may suggest that the curve of youth political engagement is currently sloping downward, raising a red flag about the relationship between Syrian youth and their political representatives in the various control areas and also in Turkey—where the majority of opposition political organizations are based. Deeper study may be warranted here.

5.2.2 Local government institutions

Although participation in local government institutions isn't usually considered "volunteer engagement," it can be in the Syrian context, where nearly 40% of the country has no local governing presence. As a result of this absence, civil society organizations, along with community and individual activism, have had to pick up the slack in a substantial way, making this type of engagement very much a public-sphere channel to explore among youth.

Bearing that in mind, we found that youth engagement levels in this domain were even lower than in the political. Less than 2% of the total sample said they are engaged with any local government institutions. Percentages ranged from 3.5% in SDF areas and 3% in opposition areas to 1.5% in Syrian communities in Turkey and 0% in regime areas.

We can therefore infer that under-representation of youth in local government bodies is even worse than in political bodies. Considering that these two types of participation are most related to the political dimension of the public sphere, our data suggests that the political public sphere is a strongly repellent environment for Syrian youth. The situation appears even more critical among youth in regime-controlled areas and those Syrian youth living in Turkey.

Youth Engagement with Local Government Institutions

	Yes, and I still do	Yes, but not currently	No	Prefer not to answer
Opposition-controlled areas	3.0%	5.0%	90.7%	1.3%
Regime-controlled areas	1.0%		99.0%	
SDF-controlled area	3.5%	2.0%	89.0%	5.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	1.5%	2.5%	96.0%	

Legend:
- Yes, and I still do
- No
- Yes, but not currently
- Prefer not to answer
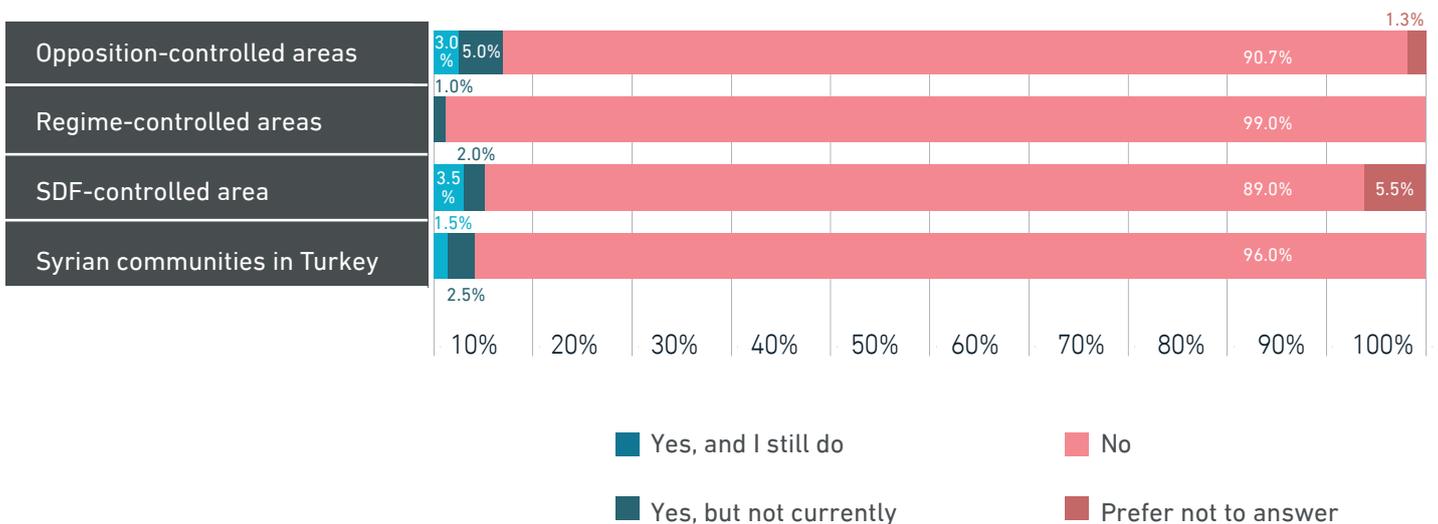
Figure 13: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their connectivity to local governing institutions.

5.2.3 Humanitarian and civil society organizations

The rate of youth engagement with the civil society and humanitarian domain of the public sphere is notably higher than in the previous two. As a whole, 15% of the sample reported being members or participants in this type of collective framework, while another nearly 13% said they were at one time but had since left.

It appears that humanitarian and civil societies are the most attractive environments for youth activism. Although there is a relatively high rate of regression, our data demonstrate it is still the biggest field of Syrian youth activism. The greater appeal could be attributed to two factors: first, working in the humanitarian and civil society domain is much safer than direct political work; and second, humanitarian and civil society programs are often accompanied by international partners and relatively sustainable funding, which can be a decisive factor in the context of the prolonged economic crisis in Syria.

Actively engaged youth figures in this framework across our four sub-sample areas are fairly even, ranging from 13% in Syrian communities in Turkey to 18% in SDF-controlled areas. Disengagement levels spike noticeably in opposition and SDF areas. But again, the highest levels are among youth who have never engaged with humanitarian or civil society organizations, with Syrian communities in Turkey at 80% and regime areas at nearly 75%. Opposition areas came third at almost 72%, and SDF areas last at 61%. So even in the public sphere domain holding the most attraction for youth, more than 60% of our study participants are entirely out of frameworks' reach.

Youth Engagement in Humanitarian or Civil Society Organizations
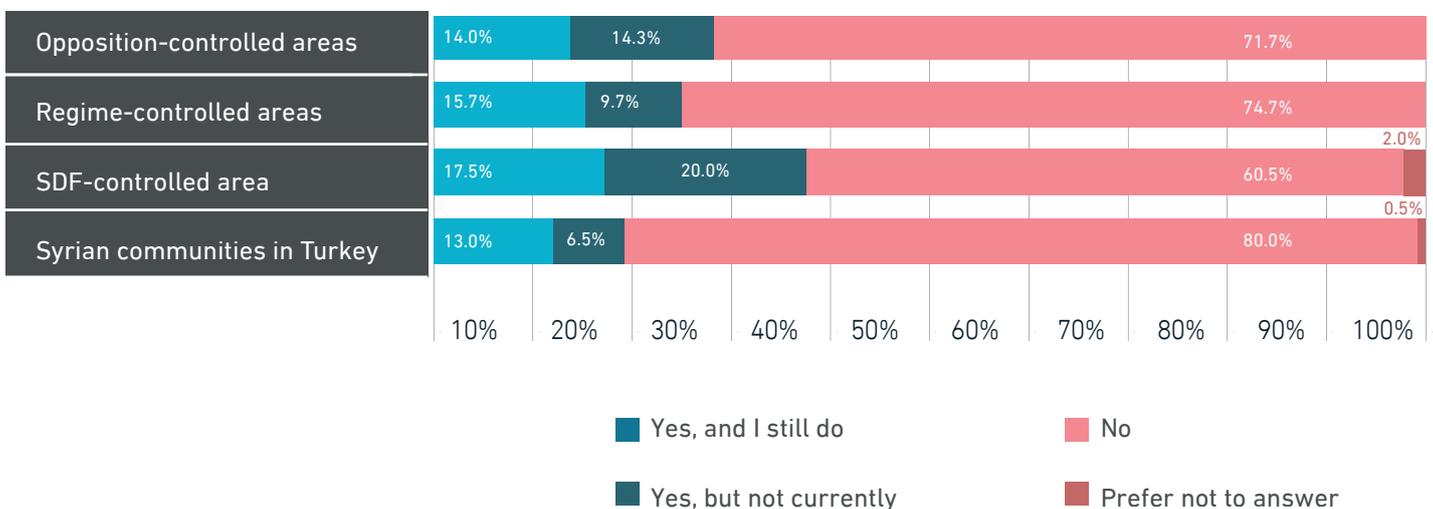
Figure 14: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their engagement with humanitarian and civil society organizations.

5.2.4 Volunteer teams or campaigns

Volunteer teams and participation in service campaigns are relatively new forms of civil engagement in Syria. This type of framework includes a wide spectrum of activities, such as humanitarian aid, services provision, and the raising of social or political awareness.

This form of engagement appears to have attracted the widest segment of youth membership and participation at 40% of the total sample; 13% of the respondents were still connected with at least one team or campaign at the time we conducted the survey. The wide gap between our numbers here and those for humanitarian/civil society organizations seems to be related to the temporary nature of this form of public sphere engagement. We do not at this time have much information about these volunteer teams and campaigns, how they operate and in which circumstances; all we know so far is that this type of engagement is growing[32] and Syrian youth seem to be interested in it.

Among the residence sub-samples, we found that 20% of respondents in regime areas and 16% in opposition areas are currently engaged in at least one volunteer team or campaign, but the percentages drop to less than 8% in SDF areas and further to 5% in Syrian communities in Turkey. These results are consistent with the general trend of the previous indicators, except the ones from SDF-controlled areas, which previously had shown the highest indicators of youth activism but here showed a far lower prevalence in terms of current activity. The percentage of those who once were active but now are not—nearly half—is substantial. A part of this result can be attributed to the fact that humanitarian needs are highest in regime and opposition areas, lower in SDF areas, and lowest in Turkey.

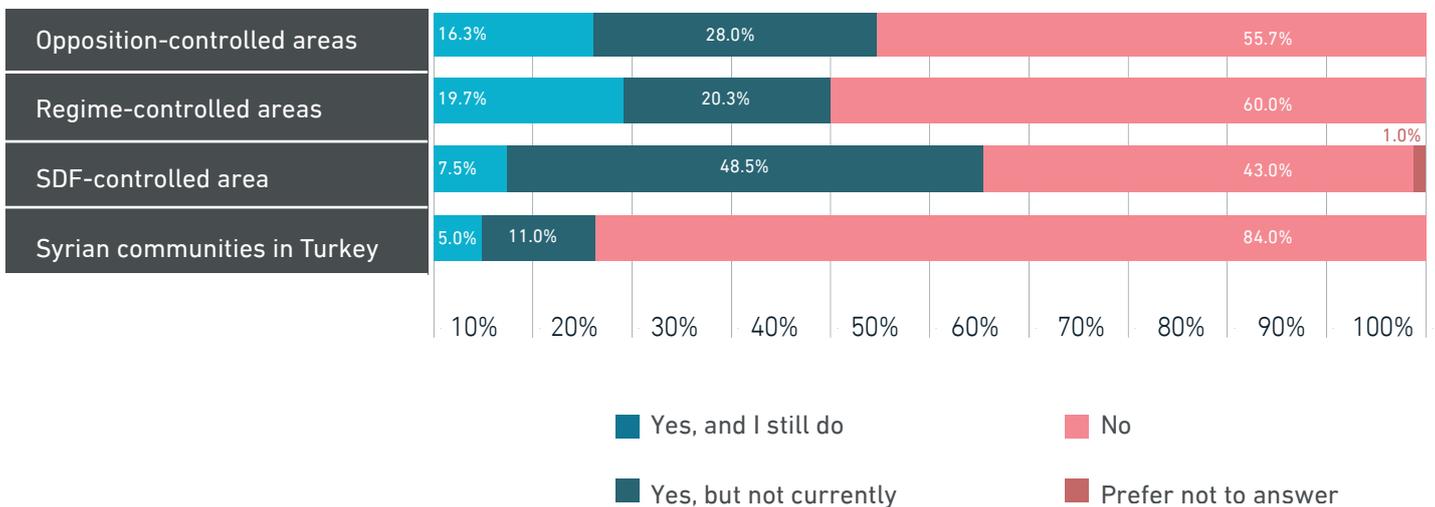**Youth Engagement in Volunteer Teams or Campaigns**

Figure 15: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their connectivity to volunteer teams or campaigns.

32- "A Qualitative Shift in the Culture of Volunteering: Syrian Youth" (in Arabic), PDF, Ain Platform, October 18, 2021, https://ainplatform.com/archives/4121.

5.2.5 Trade and student unions

Trade and student unions are an essential facet of Syrian civil society in general, and an important channel of participation in the public sphere. But this entire sector was taken over by the regime in the 1970s, leaving these unions and associations regarded as semi-governmental organizations ever since.[33] This dominance has deeply weakened union and association movements in Syria; even in non-regime areas, newly-established bodies are still generally weak and considered influenceable by authorities.

With this in mind, it's not surprising that within our sample the rates of membership in such unions are very low; of more interest, the rate of regression from unions and associations is twice that of those who remained. Only 8% of the total sample said they are currently connected to a trade or student union, while at the same time nearly 18% said they were once connected but no longer.

One explanation for the regression rates is the fact that all of the currently-operating official union bodies in Syria exist only in regime-controlled areas. While these structures were already collapsing everywhere when the regime took control, some of our youth respondents may have disengaged from these frameworks simply because they live outside regime areas.

Political attitudes have also played an important role here; after the uprising in 2011, thousands of lawyers, laborers, students, and other career holders refused to continue being members of unions that strongly supported the regime during the conflict.[34] Some of those who left established alternative bodies.

Our data infer that the regression rate peaked in SDF areas at nearly 30%; only 5% of our youth respondents living there are currently connected to any union. In opposition areas, 18% of respondents have left their unions and only 8% are still connected. Even in regime areas the regression level was nearly 12% (the lowest among our sub-samples), and its high figure among the sub-samples of those still active was only 13%, which points toward a relevant conclusion: that the weak and exploited Syrian union movement has become even weaker and more dispersed now than before the conflict.

33- Sultan Jalabi, "Syria's Third Sector ... An Analytical Study" (in Arabic), Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, January 30, 2018, https://bit.ly/Harmoon_Jalabi_S_Syrias_Third_Sector, 5-8.

34- For information on The Syrian National Students Union, see Hugh Macleod, "Syria: Revolution on Campus?," The World from PRX, May 6, 2011, https://theworld.org/stories/2011-05-06/syria-revolution-campus.

Youth Engagement in Trade and Student Unions

Opposition-controlled areas	7.7% / 18.3%	73.7% / 0.3%
Regime-controlled areas	13.0% / 11.7%	75.3%
SDF-controlled area	4.5% / 29.5%	64.5% / 1.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	6.0% / 13.0%	80.0% / 1.0%

10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

- ■ Yes, and I still do
- ■ Yes, but not currently
- ■ No
- ■ Prefer not to answer
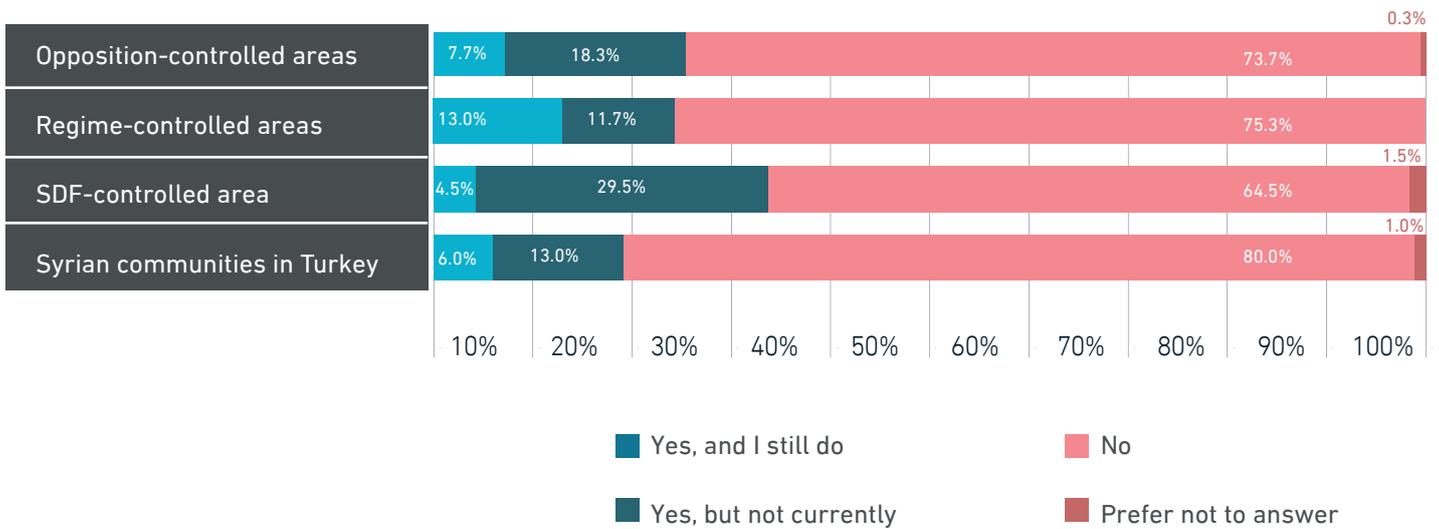
Figure 16: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their engagement in trade or student unions.

In summary, when looking at youth engagement in the public sphere through the lens of collective-action frameworks, we found weak rates of youth engagement across the five engagement domains we explored. The highest level of youth engagement was with humanitarian and civil society organizations (15%), followed closely by volunteer teams or campaigns (13%). Less than 4% of the youth we surveyed are connected to political parties or movements, and only 8% are engaged with trade and student unions.

The data set also contained information about youth participation in community-based organizations, social and sport clubs, and military groups, but in the interest of length we focused on the most interesting findings. More information can be found on the interactive dashboard.

5.2.6 Beyond membership

Analyzing youth membership and participation in collective frameworks is informative in assessing engagement level, but it doesn't draw a full picture because it captures connectivity more than activity. In other words, young people could be members of a collective framework without really being active. To address this point, we asked about activity participation as well.

Of the approximately 36% of total sample respondents who reported being current members or participants of any of the listed collective frameworks, we found that nearly half had not joined any in-person or online activities related to their affiliated framework during the three months before they were interviewed for this study. Moreover, our data showed that only 15% of those had participated in one or more activities per month during the given time frame (see Figures 17 and 18 below).

These figures suggest that youth engagement rates with these frameworks are even weaker than what was suggested by the membership assessment alone.

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Among the four study sub-samples, with a total of 356 respondents who reported connection to one or more collective frameworks, the activity rate exceeded 61% among respondents in both regime and SDF control areas but was less than 40% in the other two sub-samples. To date, we cannot be sure how best to interpret this variation; further research focusing directly on the existing collective frameworks in these areas is needed.

Have you participated in any activities related to these frameworks during the last three months?

(workshops, seminars, meetings, etc.)

	No	Yes
Opposition-controlled areas	60.7%	39.3%
Regime-controlled areas	38.6%	61.4%
SDF-controlled area	38.1%	61.9%
Syrian communities in Turkey	63.3%	36.7%

■ No   ■ Yes
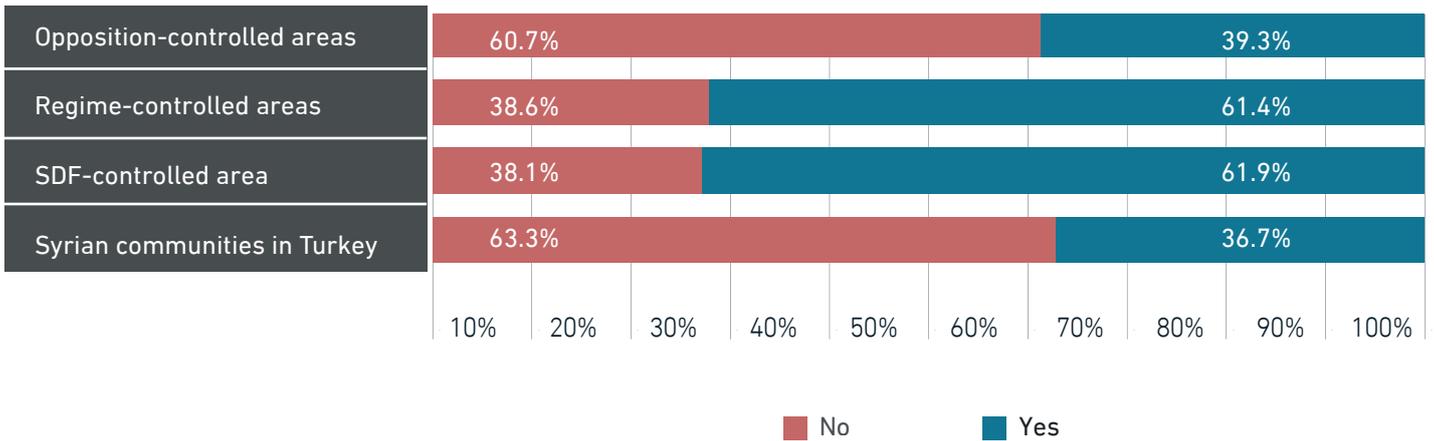
Figure 17: Distribution of sub-sample respondents who are connected with any collective framework, according to their place of residence and whether they participated in any framework activities during the three months before they were interviewed for this study. (n=356)

If yes, how many activities did you participate in?

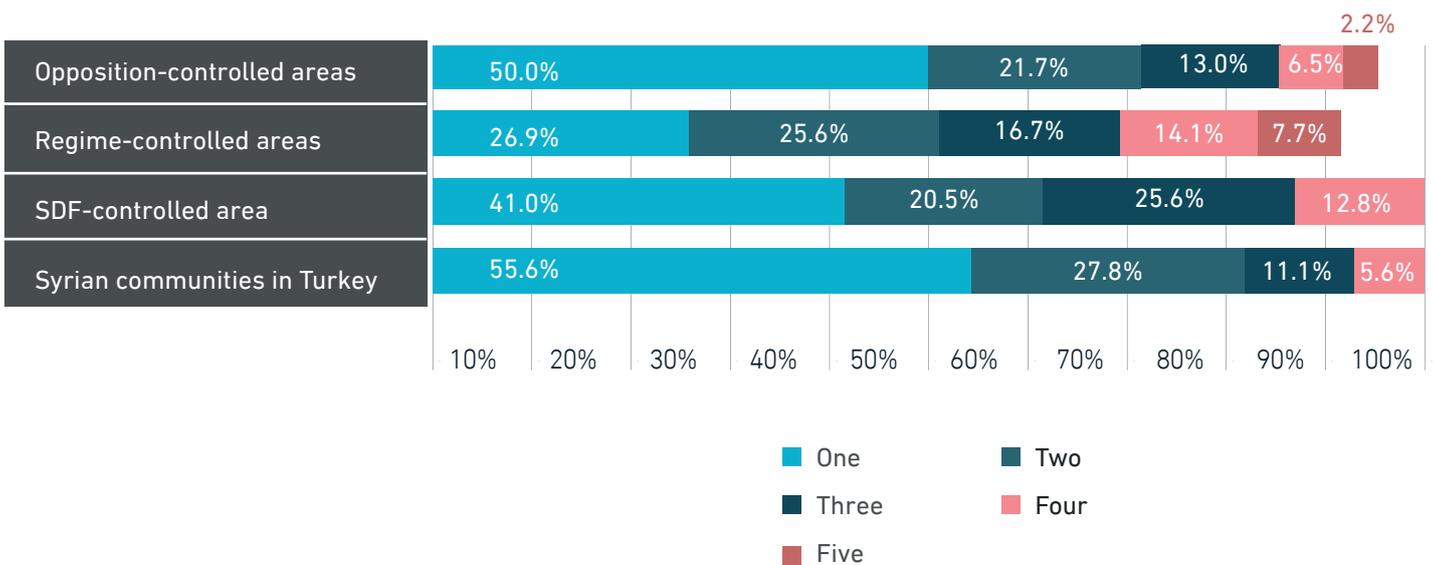|	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Opposition-controlled areas	50.0%	21.7%	13.0%	6.5%	2.2%
Regime-controlled areas	26.9%	25.6%	16.7%	14.1%	7.7%
SDF-controlled area	41.0%	20.5%	25.6%	12.8%	
Syrian communities in Turkey	55.6%	27.8%	11.1%	5.6%	

■ One   ■ Two
■ Three   ■ Four
■ Five

Figure 18: Distribution of sub-sample respondents who are connected with any collective framework and answered "yes" to the previous question, according to their place of residence and the number of framework activities they attended during the three months before they were interviewed for this study. (n=181)

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These data were our only information regarding youth engagement with collective frameworks, but what about other forms of individual engagement? We focused on two specific forms: interaction with public affairs issues on social media and engaging in talks related to public affairs with other people in their close social circles. We believe these indicators for assessing individual participation offer a comparative perspective for youth engagement in the public sphere. However, we should keep in mind that both indicators are highly affected by the local context of each studied area. For example, limits on freedom of expression can strongly impact our results.

The first individual participation indicator in our study was youth interaction with public affairs issues on social media. Social media platforms have become an important part of public sphere engagement around the world, especially for young people; they have become spaces for public debates, the formation of public opinion, and self-expression. We include this under "engagement" because the act of posting, sharing, or commenting is a step beyond merely reading out of "interest." That interest has now spurred the respondent to action—to engage.

Our findings show that just over 11% of the total sample "frequently" engage with public affairs issues on social media; 34%, the largest percentage, do so "sometimes." The remainder of the sample reported that they "rarely" or "never" engage with public affairs topics on social media.

Looking at the sub-samples, we found the lowest level of "frequent" social media engagement in public affairs was among Syrian youth living in Turkey; less than 5% of those respondents engage "frequently." "Sometimes" respondents sat between 30% and 40% in each of the sub-samples, suggesting that there is at least minimal engagement across the spectrum. But over half of respondents in each area, from 50% in opposition areas to nearly 65% in Turkey, reported "rarely" or "never" engaging in public affairs topics on social media. Whatever local factors affect these numbers, we believe that our overall findings may reflect two things: a desire for self-expression among youth, and limitations placed on that expression in the public sphere.

Looking through the lens of gender, the number of male participants who reported "frequent" engagement on social media was twice as high as that of female respondents (15% to 7%). On the other hand, about 33% of female respondents said they "never" engage in public affairs discussions on social media, compared with 21% for males.

Youth Engagement with Public Affairs Topics on Social Media

	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Opposition-controlled areas	14.0%	36.0%	28.0%	22.0%
Regime-controlled areas	11.7%	33.7%	21.3%	33.3%
SDF-controlled area	13.0%	36.0%	34.0%	17.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	4.5%	31.0%	28.0%	36.5%

Figure 19: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and the frequency of their engagement with public affairs topics on social media.

Regarding the other indicator of individual engagement—talking about public affairs with close social circles such as family members and friends—we found that nearly 23% of the total sample said they "frequently" engage in such discussions and 42% chose "sometimes." That's nearly 75% of the sample who comment on public affairs privately, compared with those who do so publicly on social media (46%).

But we also found that in those sub-sample residence areas where people interacted less with public affairs on social media, there was a higher frequency of private discussions about public affairs. This was most notable in the regime area, where 34% of the sub-sample reported "frequently" commenting on public affairs privately compared with 12% who "frequently" engaged with public affairs on social media. Another notable sub-sample result came in Turkey, where the percentages were 19% to 5% in favor of private discussions.

For the other two areas, "frequently" discussing public affairs in private was more prevalent than "frequently" doing so on social media, but the variation was much lower. In opposition areas, only 15% said they frequently discuss public affairs in private, nearly the same percentage as those who engage frequently on social media. In SDF areas, 20% said they frequently talk privately, compared with 13% who frequently engage on social media.

These differences between discussing public affairs in private or in public spaces can be taken as an indicator of the freedom of expression allowed in each of the four areas, and may reflect the higher risk associated with engagement in public affairs in those geographic areas as shown in Figure 4 earlier.

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In your daily life, do you engage in discussions of public affairs with your close social circles, such as friends and family?

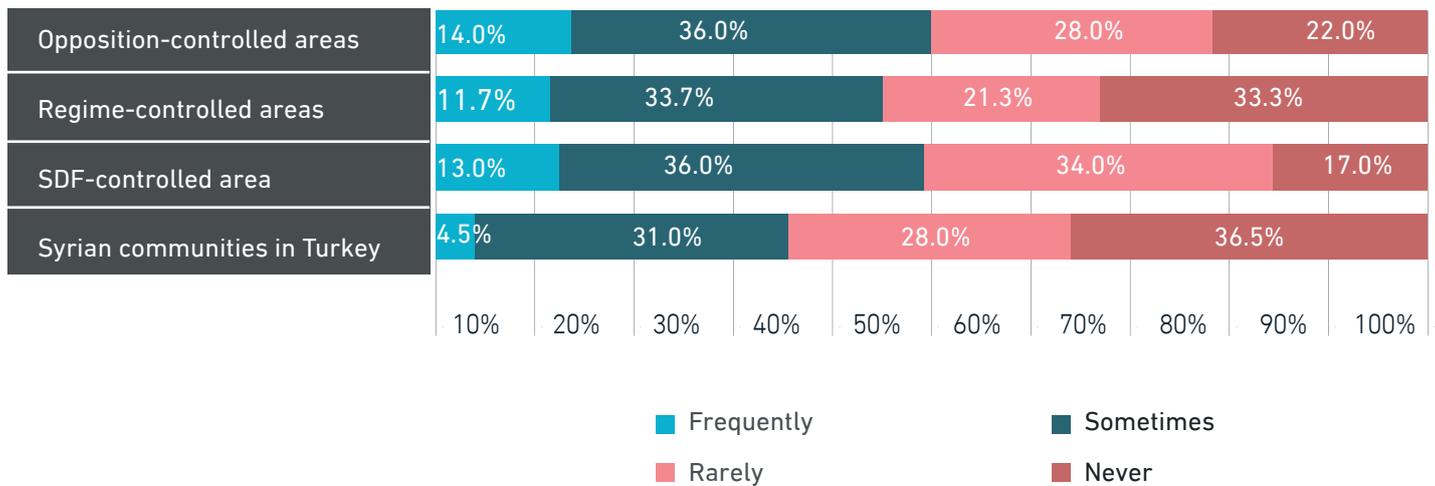|	Strong presence	Tangible presence	Weak presence	No presence
Opposition-controlled areas	15.0%	48.3%	27.3%	9.3%
Regime-controlled areas	34.7%	42.3%	19.7%	3.3%
SDF-controlled area	20.0%	33.5%	30.5%	16.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	18.5%	41.0%	32.0%	8.5%

■ Strong presence   ■ Tangible presence
■ Weak presence   ■ No presence
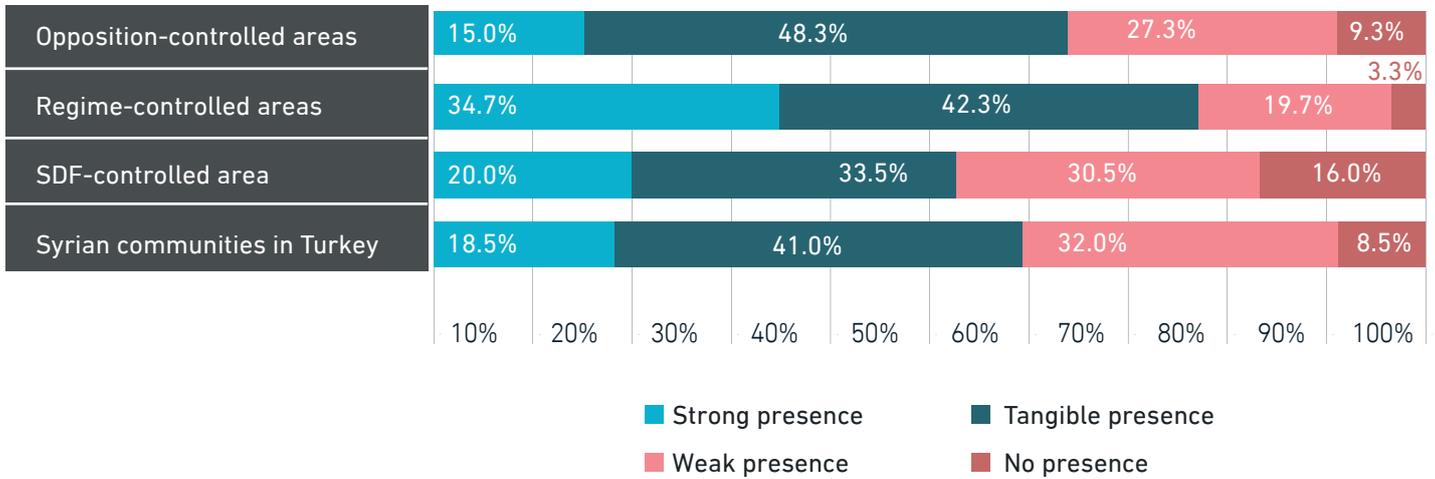
Figure 20: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and frequency of engagement in public affairs-related discussions with their close social circles.

Thus far, our sample has shown us that Syrian youth have reasonable levels of interest in the public sphere but weak levels of engagement. Many dynamics can underlie the gap between interest and engagement, including the brutality of the conflict, the variety of local, regional, and international actors, and the sheer length of the conflict (11 years now).

Now let's see how Syria's youth perceive themselves in terms of obstacles to their influence in the public sphere.

5.3 Obstacles Limiting Youth Participation and Influence

Now that we are informed about interest and engagement levels among Syrian youth, this section will shed light on some key obstacles that prevent youth participation and limit their influence in the public sphere. In our survey, we included a set of factors commonly considered key obstacles to youth engagement and asked respondents to estimate how effective each factor is at limiting their participation in public affairs. Those obstacles are:

- Livelihood pressures on young people
- Poor education and qualifications among youth
- Fear of authorities
- The unwillingness of young people to participate (reticence)
- A lack of youth collective frameworks

This question allowed us to see the importance of each of these factors from the perspective of youth, and also to see how the impact of each varies from one control area to another. We present the five factors by results from most significant to least.

5.3.1. Key factors

Livelihood pressure was deemed the most effective obstacle overall; 82% of the full sample marked it as "very limiting." But the weight attributed to this factor differed among the four control areas, though it was still very high in them all. It scored highest in regime areas (93%) and in SDF areas (87%), pointing to the depth of the economic crisis in these two areas. But it was also frequently marked "very limiting" in opposition areas (76%) and in Turkey (68%). The vast majority of the youth we surveyed feel that their day-to-day living worries are preventing them from being active in the public sphere.

These results stem from the overall economic crisis, both in Syria and in Syrian communities established in neighboring countries, which has a significant impact on youth. During the last decade, intergenerational economic relationships within Syrian families have changed. Younger generations traditionally relied on older generations who possessed the economic capital, such as land, real estate, and labor market/income access. But during the conflict—which has displaced about half of Syria's population—families' economic assets became less gainful, and a substantial number of young Syrians found themselves in the position of providing primary financial support for their families, which means a greater provision responsibility has been imposed on them in a much harder economic situation.[35]

How limiting are livelihood pressures on youth participation in public affairs?

	Very limiting	Somewhat limiting	Not very limiting	Not limiting at all
Opposition-controlled areas	76.0%	15.0%	8.7%	0.3%
Regime-controlled areas	93.0%	7.0%		
SDF-controlled area	87.0%	8.5%	3.5%	1.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	67.5%	26.5%	5.0%	1.0%

Figure 21: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their estimation of how limiting livelihood pressures are on their participation in the public sphere.

35- Sultan Jalabi, "Economic Consequences of Family Dispersion in Syria," in Local Economies in Syria: Divisions and Dependencies, PDF, ed. Salam Said (Beirut, Lebanon: Friedrich-Ebert-Siftung, 2019), pp. 17-28, 25, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/15702.pdf.

Poor education and qualifications among youth was the second-most frequently indicated "very limiting" factor by sample respondents. The overall percentage of "very limiting" was 61%, with far less variation between control areas; the highest rate was in SDF areas at 67% and the lowest in opposition areas at 55%. This leads us to examine the current conditions of education in the country.

Syria's educational system has been one of the sectors most impacted by the conflict, in both quantity and quality. There are currently three separate educational systems in Syria—one for each control area. One-third of Syrian schoolchildren have dropped out during the conflict.[36] At the higher education level, a multifaceted crisis includes financial shortages, the politicization of higher education, and the emigration of academics and university staff, all of which have contributed to an extreme decrease in the quality of education.[37]

How limiting are poor education and qualifications on youth participation in public affairs?
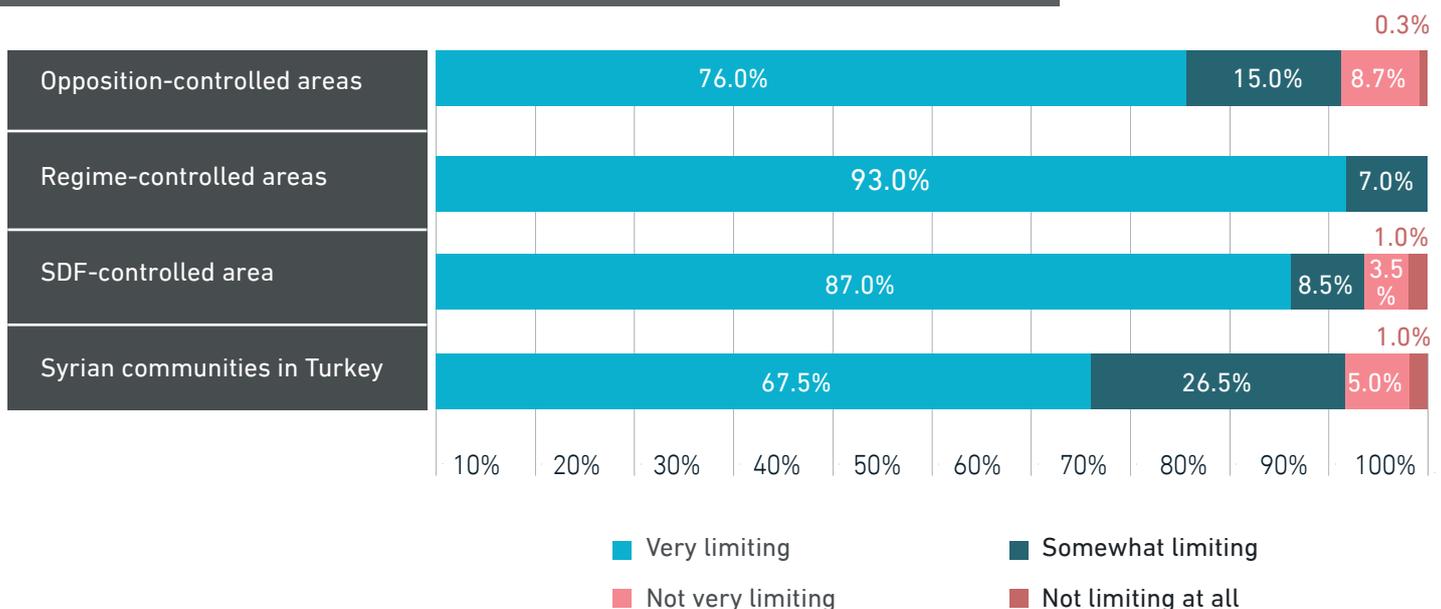

Figure 22: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their estimation of how limiting deficiencies in education/qualifications are on their participation in the public sphere.

36- "Facts & Figures Syria: Education, Q2 2019," PDF, UNICEF.org, 2019,

https://www.unicef.org/syria/media/4231/file/UNICEF%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20Education%20Q2%202019.pdf.

37- Juliet Millican et al., "Syrian Higher Education Post-2011: Immediate and Future Challenges," PDF, Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara), June 2019, https://www.cara.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/190606-POLICY-BRIEF-ENGLISH.pdf.

Fear of authorities came in as the third-highest "very limiting" obstacle to youth engagement in public affairs; around 57% of the total sample marked this factor as "very limiting." This result infers the relationship between youth and the different authorities in the three areas inside Syria, as well as with Turkish authorities.

Of particular interest here is the difference between the four sub-sample areas. The highest rate of "very limiting"—about 75%—came from respondents residing in Turkey. They were followed closely by those living in regime areas (72%). SDF areas chose "very limiting" at 53%, and opposition areas came in last at 31%.

The prominent variation between the four areas reflects both the level of stress between youth and the dominant authority in each area and risk factors for activity in the public sphere.

How limiting is the fear of authorities on youth participation in public affairs?

	Very limiting	Somewhat limiting	Not very limiting	Not limiting at all
Opposition-controlled areas	31.3%	25.3%	23.7%	19.7%
Regime-controlled areas	72.3%	23.3%	1.0%	3.3%
SDF-controlled area	52.5%	35.5%	7.0%	5.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	74.5%	21.5%	1.5%	2.5%

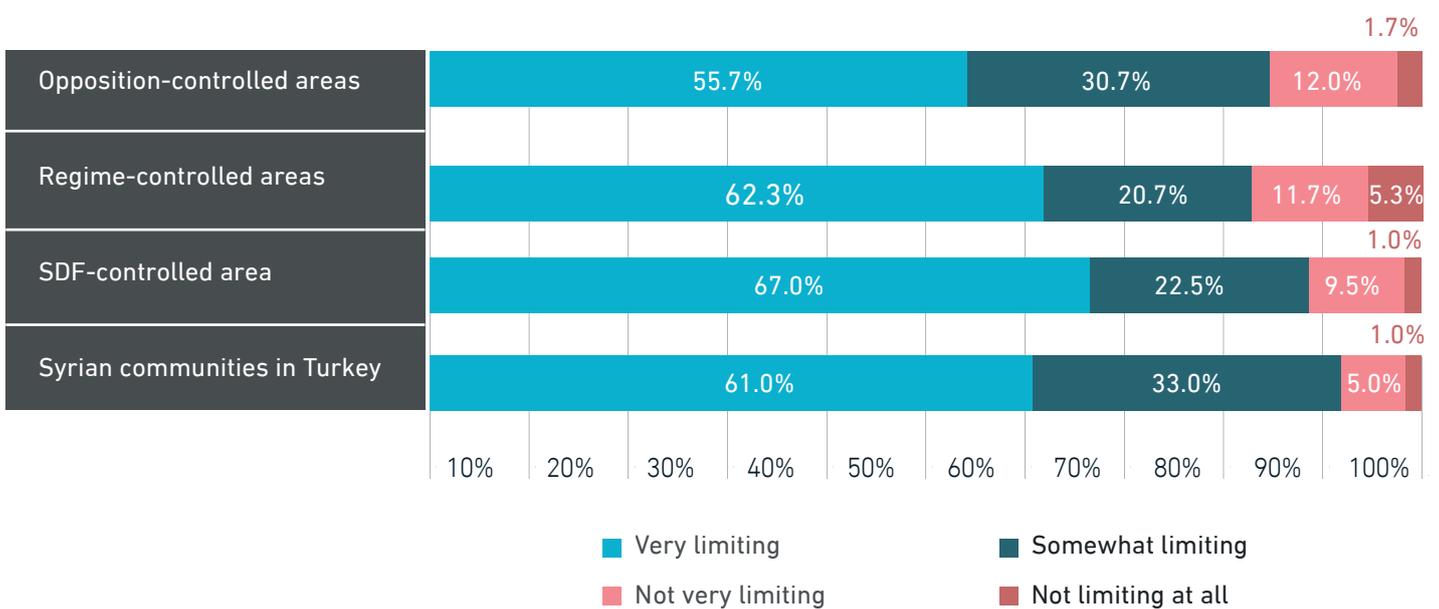Legend: ■ Very limiting   ■ Somewhat limiting   ■ Not very limiting   ■ Not limiting at all

Figure 23: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their estimation of how limiting the fear of authorities is on their participation in the public sphere.

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While youth reticence (**unwillingness to participate**) in the public sphere can be considered an obstacle on its own, it can also be considered a result of the previously mentioned factors. Either way, it gives insight into the spread of disengagement culture among Syrian youth, informed by the respondents' impressions. The higher the rate here, the more prevalent the impression of disengagement.

We found that 47% of the full sample classified youth reticence as a "very limiting" factor. The only substantial sub-sample deviation we found was in opposition areas, where only 30% of those respondents thought it was "very limiting," compared with 50–60% in each of the other three control areas. This result suggests that youth reticence in opposition areas does not have as powerful a presence in the opposition areas as in the others.

How limiting to youth participation in the public sphere is a general unwillingness among youth to engage?

	Very limiting	Somewhat limiting	Not very limiting	Not limiting at all
Opposition-controlled areas	30.3%	47.7%	18.7%	3.3%
Regime-controlled areas	57.0%	24.3%	10.7%	8.0%
SDF-controlled area	50.5%	18.0%	24.5%	7.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	54.5%	34.5%	8.0%	3.0%

■ Very limiting   ■ Somewhat limiting
■ Not very limiting   ■ Not limiting at all
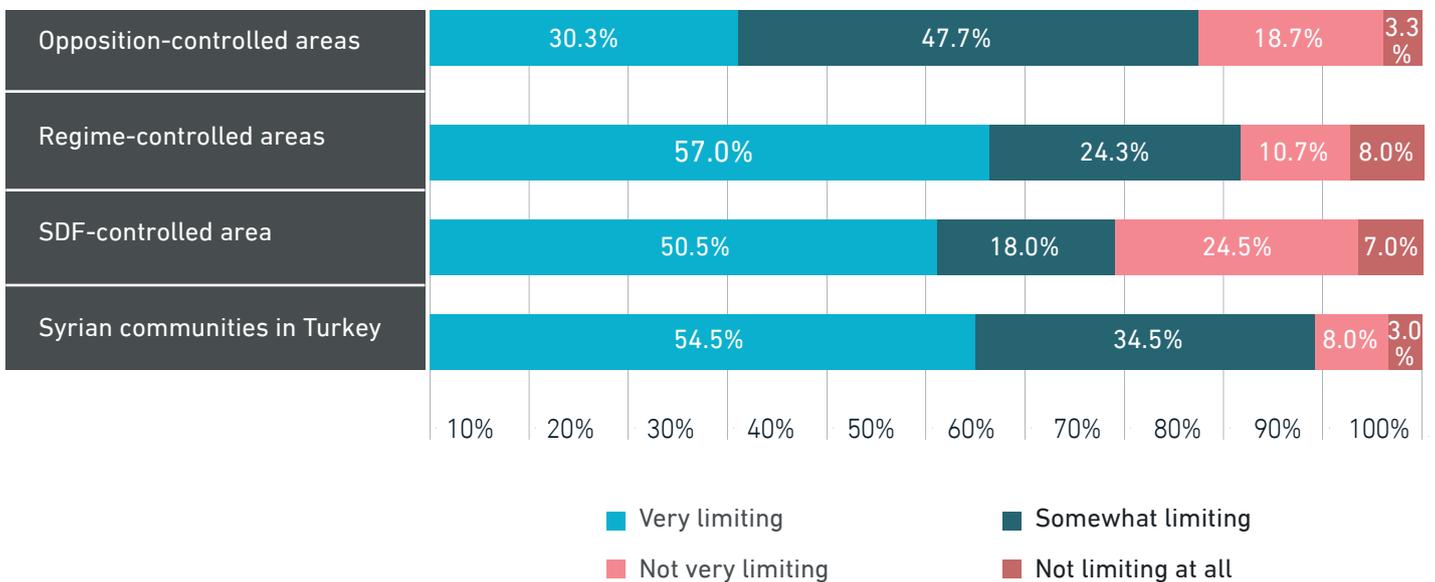
Figure 24: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their estimation of to what extent a general reticence among youth to engage limits the respondent's participation in the public sphere.

The last factor we focused on was the **lack of youth collective frameworks** available to participate in; nearly 39% of the full sample marked this factor as "very limiting." This question refers to the functionality of existing youth frameworks and to what extent they have the ability to attract, organize, and activate the youth population. However, sub-sample variations reveal that this factor is less impactful in both opposition and SDF areas (28% for each), while it appears more limiting in the other two areas; in regime areas, the percentage was 53%, and in Turkey around 46%.

But these numbers should not be taken as a sign that there are enough properly functioning collective frameworks in opposition and SDF areas. We read it as more about "collective frameworks aren't the issue" compared with livelihood, security, and youth reticence factors.

How limiting is a lack of available collective frameworks on youth participation in public affairs?

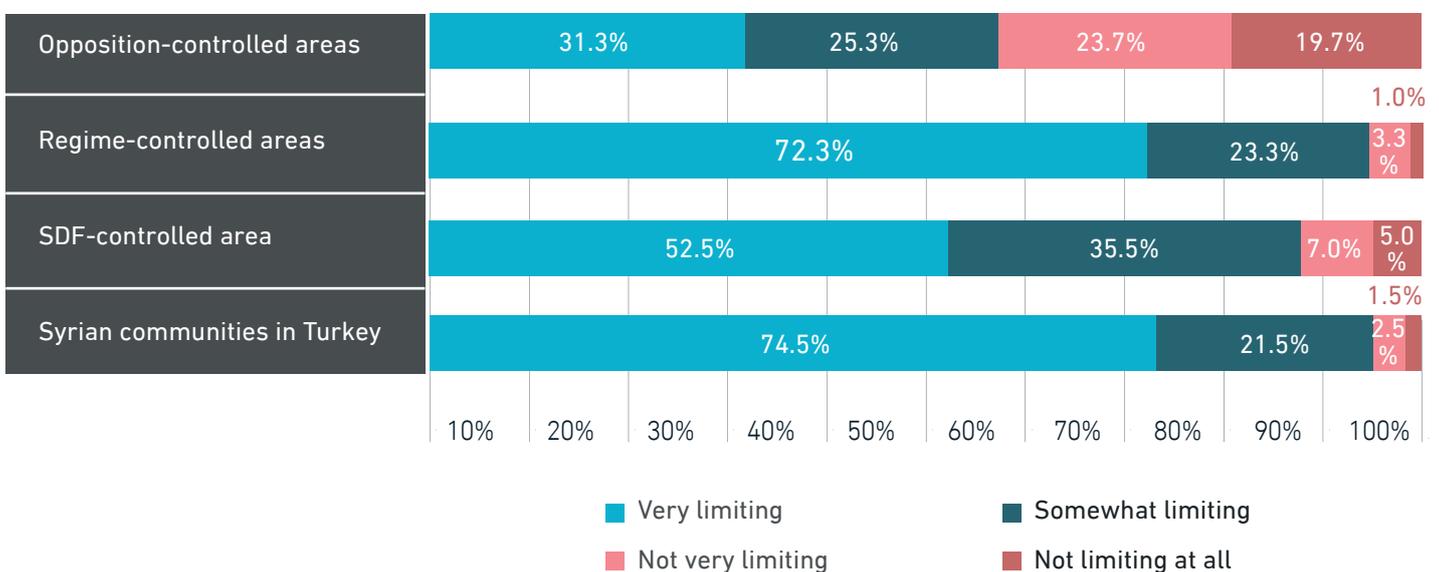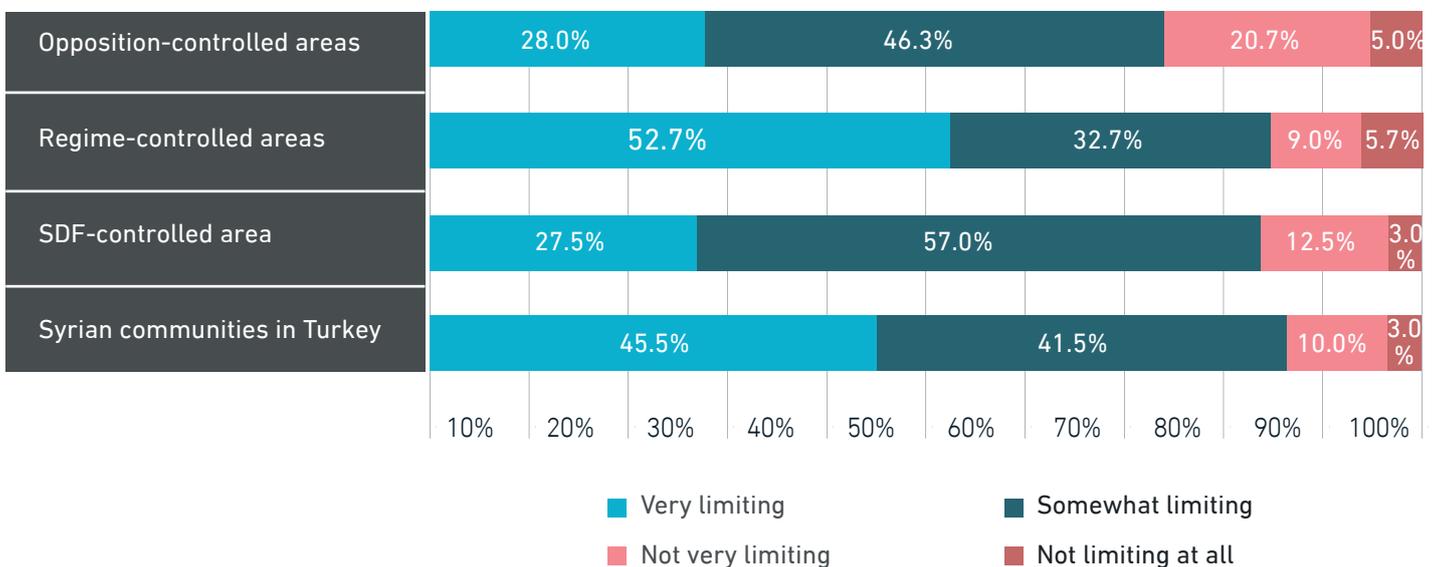|	Very limiting	Somewhat limiting	Not very limiting	Not limiting at all
Opposition-controlled areas	28.0%	46.3%	20.7%	5.0%
Regime-controlled areas	52.7%	32.7%	9.0%	5.7%
SDF-controlled area	27.5%	57.0%	12.5%	3.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	45.5%	41.5%	10.0%	3.0%

Figure 25: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their estimation of how limiting the lack of available youth collective frameworks is on their participation in the public sphere.

5.3.2 Self-perception of youth influence in the public sphere as an additional factor

There is a two-way relationship between youth engagement and their influence or presence in the public sphere. The more youth get involved with public affairs, the more potential influence they have; conversely, the more influence some youth groups or individuals have in the public sphere, the more we expect them to inspire even more young people to get engaged. In other words, young people's perception of their potential influence plays an essential role in their decision to engage or disengage.

In that light, we asked participants to assess the level of youth presence, as individuals or as groups, in their area's public affairs, using a four-degree scale as shown in Figure 26.

We found that more than half of the total sample (52%) believe that youth have a weak or nonexistent presence in the public sphere of their areas. A mere 17% believe they have a "strong presence," and 31% perceived a "tangible presence."

These results were surprising; we didn't expect that self-estimation of youth influence in the public sphere would reach this mean level, considering the level of youth engagement noted in the previous chapter—especially the engagement through collective frameworks where actual influence usually emerges. While youth overestimation of their influence could be one explanation, our data showed some interesting differences between the four areas. Also interesting are the findings regarding that portion of youth respondents who played leadership roles within their collective frameworks, which we used as a second influence indicator.

We found that 28% of respondents in opposition areas believe that the youth have a "strong presence" in the public sphere; 23% of SDF-area respondents believe so. Notably, the youth self-perceived "strong presence" decreased to 11% in regime areas and to 3% in Turkey. These figures coincide with the previous chapter's findings about youth engagement levels in those areas.

How strong a presence do you believe youth have, as individuals or as a group, in the public sphere in your area?

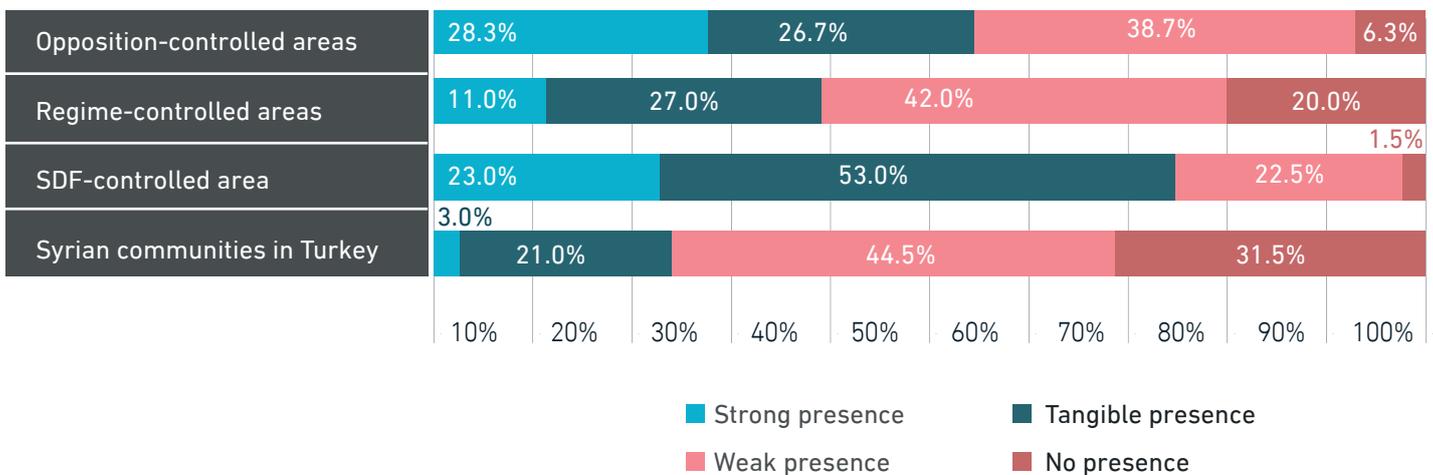|	Strong presence	Tangible presence	Weak presence	No presence
Opposition-controlled areas	28.3%	26.7%	38.7%	6.3%
Regime-controlled areas	11.0%	27.0%	42.0%	20.0%
SDF-controlled area	23.0%	53.0%	22.5%	1.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	3.0%	21.0%	44.5%	31.5%

Figure 26: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their personal estimation of the youth influence in the public sphere in their area.

The second aspect of youth influence is brought by respondents who said they are connected to one or more collective frameworks (political party, civil society organization, volunteer team, etc.), by focusing on that portion of this subset (n=356) who have held any leadership role within their collective framework. Notably, 30% said they play or have played a leadership role, suggesting that while only about a third of our total sample engage in collective frameworks, only a third who do ever lead within them.

The sub-sample results showed some curious findings, however. Most confusing is that youth leadership rates in both Turkey (35%) and in regime areas (32%) were higher than in SDF (25%) and opposition areas (27%). This result appears to be in conflict with previous results shown in Figures 25 and 26, as well as with the entire pattern which has emerged in this study—that youth activism in regime areas and in Turkey is both riskier and more difficult.

Nevertheless, we interpreted this discordance as a commentary on the effectiveness of the collective frameworks in each of the study areas. This explanation is supported by the results in Figure 25, where both regime areas and Turkey showed a higher need for effective collective frameworks. In that case, no matter how many young people are engaged or play leading roles, if the frameworks themselves have no influence in the public sphere, neither will the youth associated with them. A very centralized authority controls the entire public sphere in regime areas, and the Syrian collective frameworks in Turkey have a limited margin of activism.

Have you ever held a leadership role within these frameworks?

	No	Yes
Opposition-controlled areas	72.6%	27.4%
Regime-controlled areas	68.5%	31.5%
SDF-controlled area	74.6%	25.4%
Syrian communities in Turkey	65.3%	34.7%

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%
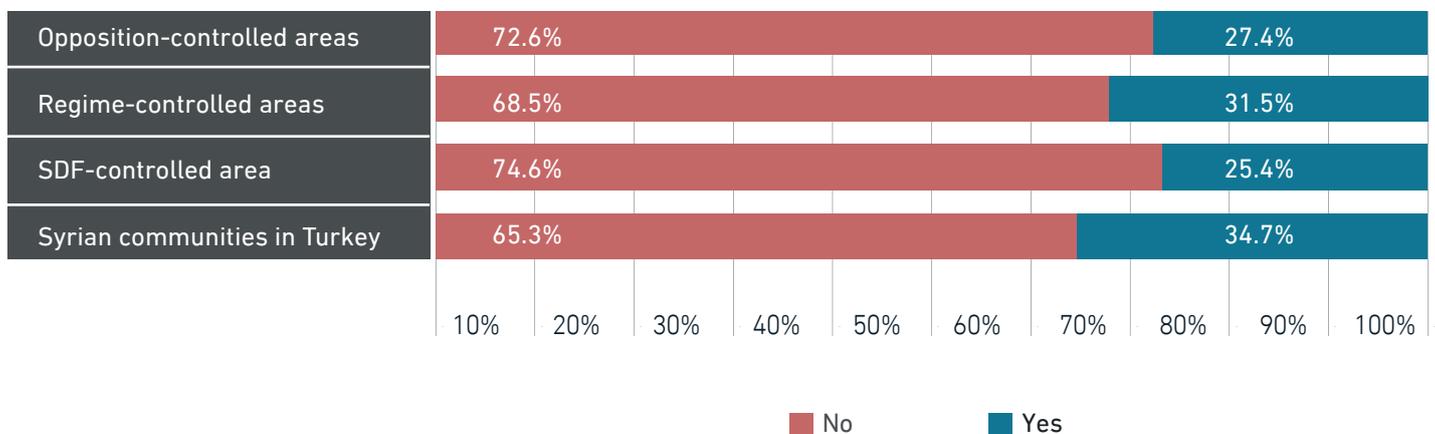
■ No   ■ Yes

Figure 27: Distribution of respondents who are connected to collective frameworks (n=356) according to their place of residence and what, if any, leadership role they have ever held within those frameworks.

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To summarize this section, it appears that economic pressures are the leading obstacle to public engagement for the vast majority of our sample; it is significantly higher in regime areas. The second most prevalent obstacle is related to youth qualifications and capabilities for public sphere engagement, a direct consequence of the educational decline in both quality and quantity, with only a modest variation between the four areas.

The third most prevalent obstacle, which was significantly higher among youth in regime areas and in Turkey, is fear of authorities. Three-quarters of these two sub-samples combined marked this obstacle as "very limiting," compared with about half in SDF areas and less than a third in opposition areas. This clearly indicates the risk associated with public sphere activity in each area.

While these three obstacles appear highly limiting to a majority of all control area respondents, two others—a general reticence among youth to participate, and a lack of youth collective frameworks to participate in—were seen as less obstructive. Even so, the numbers were still high enough to be troubling.

Meanwhile, youth perceptions of the strength of their influence in the public sphere appears higher in opposition and SDF areas than in regime areas or in Turkey. This may be due to the iron fist of control the regime has over its public sphere, and to the limited reach of frameworks operating from Syrian communities in Turkey, where these young people are essentially in exile.

5.4 Interventions

We will first discuss the availability of youth empowerment programs, whatever those programs are, from the perspective of our sample participants. We will then discuss what can be done to increase youth inclusion in the public sphere. And we will end the section by presenting results on the recommendations, messages, and ambitions of Syrian youth provoked by three open-ended questions in the survey (See Appendix 1).

5.4.1 Availability of youth empowerment programs

Respondents were asked whether they had ever heard about any youth empowerment programs in their area, such as training, workshops, funded projects, or any other type of program aimed specifically at youth empowerment. In our results, 43% of respondents said they had never heard about such programs being conducted in their area. Considering our data was collected from only urban areas where such programs would be expected to exist, this high rate speaks directly to the absence of these programs or the lack of efficiency in communicating with their beneficiaries.

At the sub-sample level (Figure 28), we found the most critical situation to be in Turkey, where nearly 71% of respondents said they had never heard of any programs concerned with Syrian youth empowerment. Both regime and opposition area respondents reported having no knowledge of Syrian youth programs at a rate of around 41%, but SDF area respondents scored lowest, with only 24% reporting no knowledge of such programs. These numbers highlight the share of youth completely outside the circles of any empowerment programs.

Have you ever heard of any youth empowerment programs implemented in the area where you live?

	No	Yes
Opposition-controlled areas	41.0%	59.0%
Regime-controlled areas	40.3%	59.7%
SDF-controlled area	23.5%	76.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	70.5%	29.5%

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ No ■ Yes
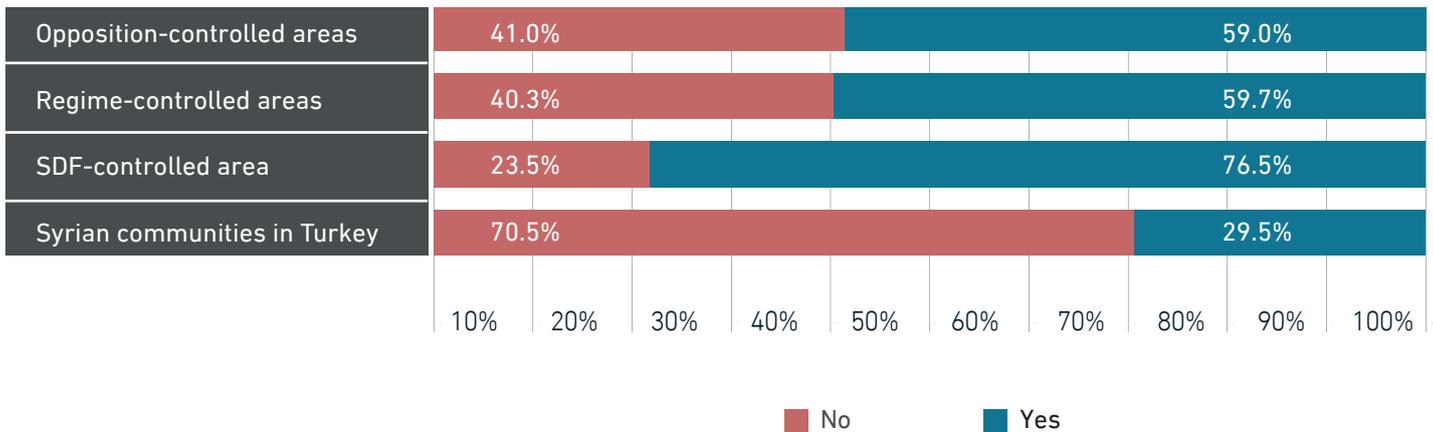
Figure 28: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and whether they knew of any youth empowerment programs implemented in their area.

Of course, this doesn't mean that those respondents who do know of programs are actually participating in them. Of the 57% of the total sample who said they had heard of any empowerment programs, only half of them (28% of the total sample) said they'd ever had the opportunity to participate in one or more of them. The other portion of those who had heard of empowerment programs, 72% of the total sample, said they'd never had the opportunity to participate.

Even at the sub-sample level, the highest level of participation opportunity was only 40% in regime areas; it decreased to 25% in both SDF and opposition areas, and to only 16% in Turkey.

What these data suggest is that there are fewer empowerment opportunities for Syrian youth who live in Turkey than for their peers living inside Syria; the best opportunities to benefit from one of these programs are for youth living in regime areas.

Have you ever had the opportunity to participate in any of the youth empowerment programs?

	No	Yes
Opposition-controlled areas	74.0%	26.0%
Regime-controlled areas	59.7%	40.3%
SDF-controlled area	74.5%	25.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	84.0%	16.0%

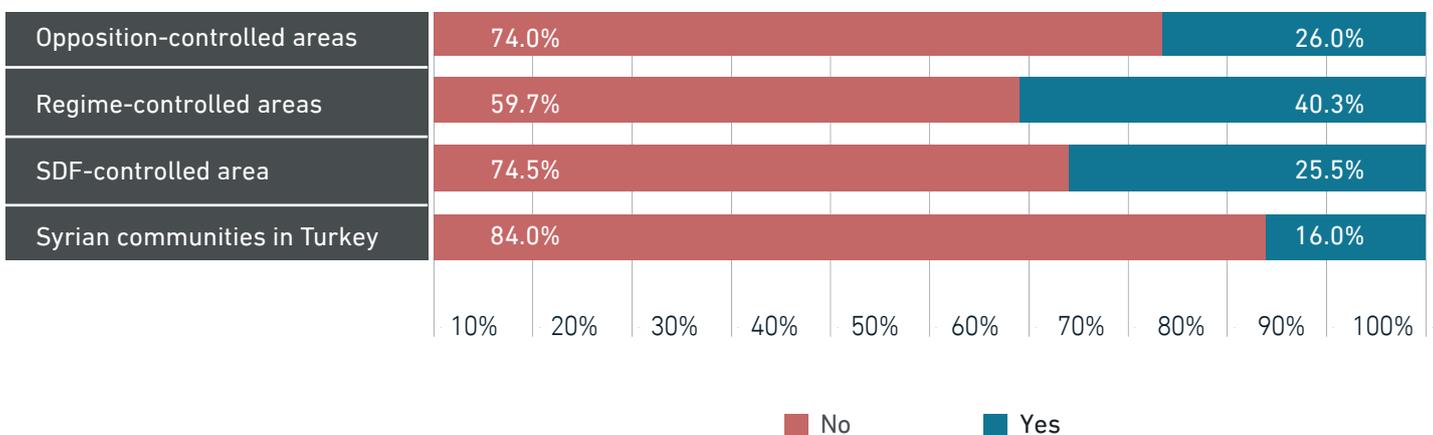10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ No ■ Yes

Figure 29: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and whether they had ever had the opportunity to participate in a youth empowerment program implemented in their area.

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The last note regarding empowerment programs is about the levels of participation; here we found that 78% of our sample have never taken part in any program. Across the four sub-sample areas the rates were 71% or more; the peak, as expected, was in the Turkey sub-sample—91% have never been involved in any program.

Have you ever participated in youth empowerment programs?

Area	No	Yes
Opposition-controlled areas	76.7%	23.3%
Regime-controlled areas	71.0%	29.0%
SDF-controlled area	77.5%	22.5%
Syrian communities in Turkey	91.0%	9.0%

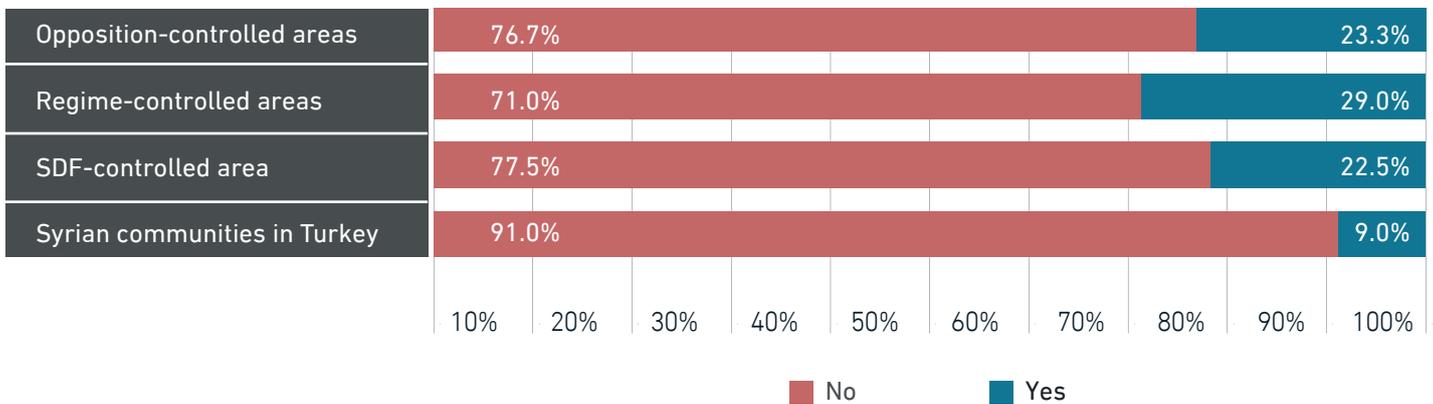10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ No   ■ Yes

Figure 30: Distribution of sample respondents according to their place of residence and whether they have ever actually participated in a youth empowerment program implemented in their area.

It is difficult to provide any further interpretation for these results without details on the local context in which these youth-targeted programs operate or on the nature and capacities of the programs themselves. However, even if it is not the goal to include every single Syrian young person in these empowerment programs, one can still argue that when less than a quarter of the total sample have the opportunity to benefit from any program, there is likely a significant lack of coverage.

5.4.2. Messages from Syrian youth

At the end of each interview, we asked our participants: if you had the chance to get involved in one cause or public affair, what would it be? What would be your first priority for engaging with your own public sphere? This was an open-ended question, but we were able to classify 77% of the 1,000 answers into five activism sectors that address the following topics:

- Livelihood support
- Education and rehabilitation of youth
- Addressing societal problems
- Enhancing peace and political stability
- Preparing frameworks for youth engagement

The remaining responses were divided between 10% who gave no answer to this question and nearly 14% who were interested in other topics not directly connected to any of the five mentioned above. Those topics included: cancellation of compulsory military service, the issues with legal documentation arising from the conflict, youth immigration, etc. Although important, our data showed these topics are not currently among the top priorities.

5.4.2.1. Youth priorities regarding public affairs

Our findings show that, with no close competitor, 30% of respondents chose issues or causes related directly to livelihood and economic support, such as providing employment opportunities, raising salaries, and providing tangible support as their top priorities. Even at the sub-sample level, only one control area did not choose livelihood issues first; in Turkey (29%), opposition areas (35%), and regime areas (36%) it was the priority.

In SDF areas, the outlier, the largest portion of respondents (26%) were more interested in the political sector; more precisely, in enhancing peace and political stability. The total sample rate for this response was less than 10%, but the SDF figure seems likely to be connected to the youth engagement with collective frameworks we discussed in Chapter 2. We again attribute this difference to the fact that the SDF area has had a sort of ethnic-based political life, with parties and movements even before the conflict began. Political stability remains a high priority, unlike in the other sub-sample areas where it came in fourth among the five main sectors respondent answers fell into.

The second highest priority choice for our sample was linked to the educational and rehabilitation sector; 16% chose this set of issues as their priority, about half the percentage who chose livelihood issues as paramount. But this figure did not have the same outlier; it was the second most-chosen priority across all four location sub-samples.

Prioritization of this sector among the sub-sample groups was higher in opposition areas (22%) and in SDF areas (nearly 18%), while it was the priority for only 11% of respondents in regime areas and only 13% for respondents living in Turkey. Part of this variation is connected to the educational system in each area; regardless of the quality of education and rehabilitation, the latter two areas have internationally-recognized educational institutions affiliated with the Syrian and Turkish governments. This is not the case in opposition and SDF areas; educational institutions are only locally affiliated with the interim opposition government in the northwest and with the Autonomous Authority in the northeast.

Social issues were chosen as a priority by the third-largest group, nearly 14% of the total sample. Higher levels of interest in this sector among the sub-samples occurred in both opposition areas and in Turkey at around 18%. The lowest rate was in regime areas at not quite 8%, and SDF areas came in the middle at 11%. Unfortunately, the quantitative approach of this study cannot provide much evidence for further interpretation of these variations.

If you had the opportunity to raise an issue or a problem of public concern, what topic would you choose to work on?

Opposition-controlled areas	34.3%	22.0%	17.3%	4.0%	4.7%	9.0%	8.7%
Regime-controlled areas	35.3%	11.0%	7.7%	8.3%	7.3%	10.3%	20.0%
SDF-controlled area	16.5%	17.5%	11.5%	26.0%	11.0%	5.5%	12.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	29.0%	13.0%	18.5%	4.5%	7.0%	14.5%	13.5%

10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

- ■ Livelihood support
- ■ Support youth education and rehabilitation
- ■ Deal with social issues/problems
- ■ Enhance peace and political stability
- ■ Enhance youth engagement
- ■ No answer
- ■ Other

Figure 31: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their primary cause in which to engage with the public sphere given the opportunity.

Policymakers understand that interventions should be sustainable; knowing which public sphere domains appeal to and attract Syrian youth will result in better designs and methods for youth-targeted programs in the future, so that they run more efficiently and more effectively reach their intended beneficiaries.

5.4.2.2 Youth priorities: a gender-based analysis

We found a few notable variations between male and female respondents. Livelihood sector issues were the highest priority for both, and showed a variance of about five percentage points leaning toward male respondents.

A more notable variation showed under "Dealing with Social Issues/Problems." This sector covered a wide spectrum, such as the prevalence of drugs, social and gender inequality, disability causes, etc. While nearly 14% of the total sample said they would prefer to engage with these problems (the second most-chosen sector), the variance was nine percentage points—18% among female respondents and only 9% among male respondents.

"Peace and political stability" showed a slighter gender variation toward male participants, just over 11% compared with 8.4% among female respondents (3.5-point variance).

The last notable gender variance showed among respondents who chose "no answer." This revealed a six-point variance; 7% of male respondents to nearly 13% of females.

Having so few (and very few really notable) gender-related variances among our youth sample speaks to a breadth of common understanding among both male and female youth regarding their relationship with the public sphere, a positive sign for potential interaction.

If you had the opportunity to raise an issue or a problem of public concern, what topic would you choose to work on?

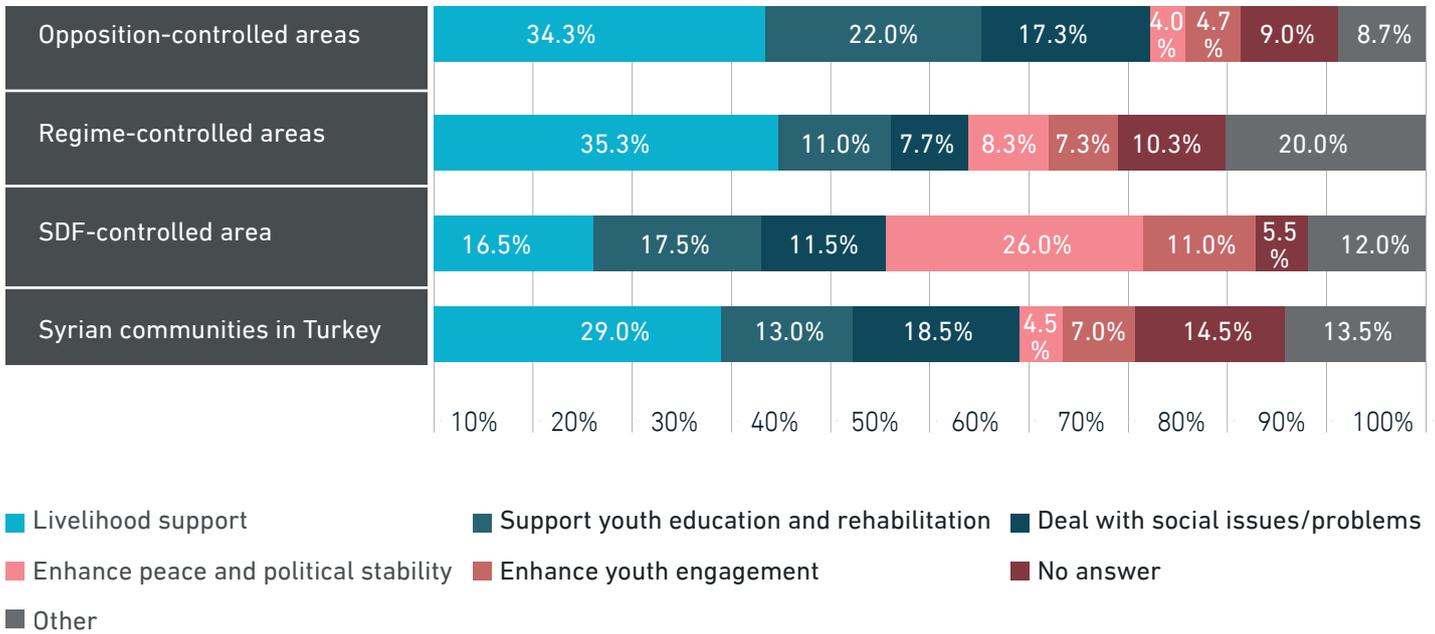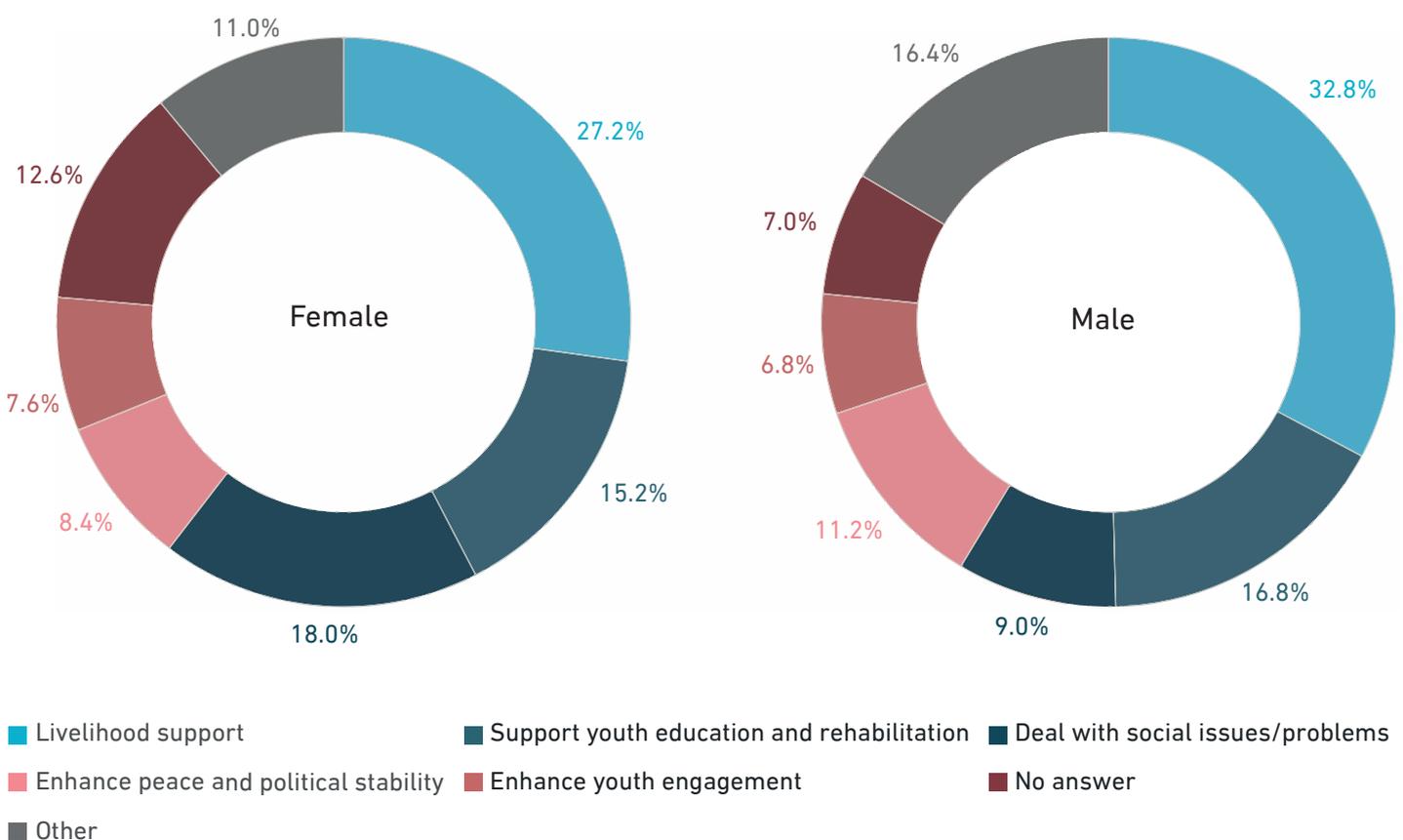Figure 32: Distribution of respondents according to their gender and their primary cause in which to engage with the public sphere given the opportunity.

We can generate four key conclusions from these numbers:

- There is a variety of youth interest in different domains of the public sphere.
- Livelihood support is the most attractive field for youth engagement.
- Only 10% of the total sample expressed a desire to work on peacebuilding and political issues (but it is fairly popular in SDF areas).
- No major variances exist between male and female respondents; the most notable was a higher tendency among females to want to work on social issues.

5.4.2.3. There is still a space of hope

Finally, we asked our sample participants to describe their level of optimism about the future of youths' relationship with the public sphere. About half of them expressed strong or moderate optimism (49%), with another nearly 32% saying they are not sure; only 15% expressed moderate or strong pessimism). This last segment of youth appears to have completely lost hope and probably any desire to be part of public sphere-related activism. But the vast majority of the sample are keeping their eyes on the condition of their country and expecting better days, along with better opportunities for them to contribute.

How optimistic/pessimistic are you about the future of the relationship between youth and public affairs?

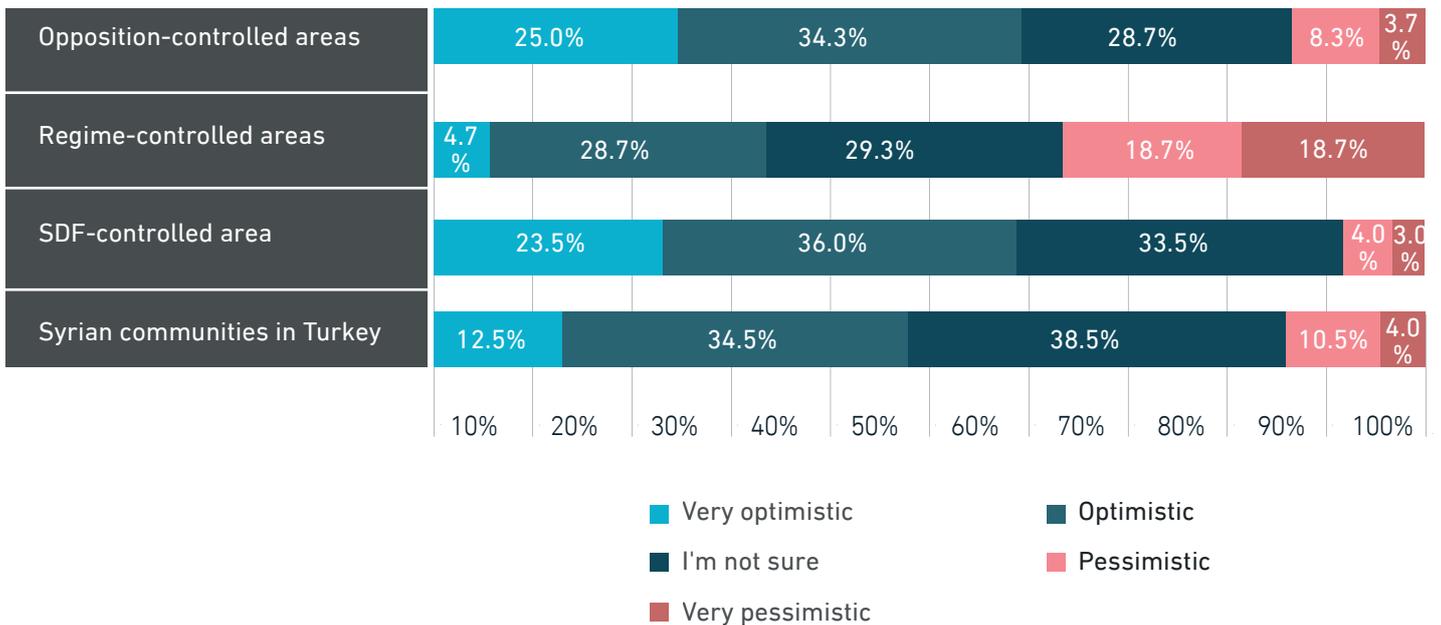|	Very optimistic	Optimistic	I'm not sure	Pessimistic	Very pessimistic
Opposition-controlled areas	25.0%	34.3%	28.7%	8.3%	3.7%
Regime-controlled areas	4.7%	28.7%	29.3%	18.7%	18.7%
SDF-controlled area	23.5%	36.0%	33.5%	4.0%	3.0%
Syrian communities in Turkey	12.5%	34.5%	38.5%	10.5%	4.0%

Figure 33: Distribution of respondents according to their place of residence and their level of optimism about youths' future relationship with the public sphere.

6. Conclusions

● In this study, we conducted an exploration of the multidimensional relationship between Syrian young people and their public sphere, in a country that stepped out of four decades of dictatorship into a public uprising, then into another decade of open warfare and political fragmentation.

● We adopted a field-based quantitative approach to study this relationship in the three main control areas in Syria (regime, opposition, and SDF) as well as within the Syrian community in Turkey. We focused on three aspects of youth relationships with the public sphere—their interest, their participation, and their perceived obstacles—and then reflected on those results to provide some insight about ongoing interventions and desired future ones.

● Interest in public affairs is the first foundation for any potential engagement, and our data showed that about half of the total sample perceive themselves as interested in public affairs. Looking through the sub-sample lenses, we found the highest level of interest in SDF areas, then in opposition areas. Participants from regime areas showed less interest, as did Syrian youth living in Turkey.

● Sample participants demonstrated varied attitudes toward the public sphere. More frequently, it was perceived as a stressful area; for others, it was a civic duty to be fulfilled or a right to strive for. We noted that respondents from regime areas and from Turkey considered the public sphere to be "risky" twice as often as those from the other areas. But there is a common space of hope among youth from all four areas; more than half of our participants still believe they can play an important role in the future.

● Regarding youth organization, we found that two-thirds of our participants were not connected to any collective frameworks, whether political, civic, trade or student union, or a community-based organization. Among those who were, the clear preference was for humanitarian and civil society work rather than political; only 1 in 25 of respondents indicated a connection with any political organization, while 1 in 6 was connected with a civil society organization.

● Our study sheds some light on the key obstacles preventing youth from engagement. We found that livelihood pressures are the most prevalent obstacle and are more limiting in regime and SDF areas. The second most prevalent obstacle was poor education and qualifications among youth—this was also more limiting in SDF areas. Third in prevalence was fear of authorities, most notable in regime areas and in the sub-sample of Syrian youth living in Turkey.

● Even with low engagement levels and the variety of obstacles, nearly half the sample believe that youth still have a strong or tangible influence on the public sphere in their areas. This perception seems to be higher in opposition and SDF areas, respectively. But it appears much weaker in the other two areas.

● Nearly 8 in 10 research participants have never been part of a youth empowerment program; almost half had never heard about any of these programs being conducted in their areas. The highest prevalence of not knowing about existing programs was in the case of those Syrian youth living in Turkey.

- Five key domains of the public sphere emerged as our youth sample's first priority for their personal public sphere engagement. From highest to lowest among the total sample: livelihood issues, education and rehabilitation issues, social issues, peacebuilding and political stability issues, and issues related to the preparation of organizational frameworks for youth engagement in the public sphere. These are the main priorities of the research sample, and these figures suggest that interventions relating to these priorities will more successfully provoke youth engagement and activism.

- There was one outlier among the location sub-sample groups regarding respondents' first priority for personal activism in the public sphere: about a quarter of SDF area participants were primarily interested in "enhancing peace and political stability;" for them, the livelihood issue came third. Across the other three location sub-samples, this choice was a priority for only about 1 in 10 participants.

- One notable variance appeared when we looked at youth priorities for engagement in the public sphere through the lens of gender. Female respondents were more interested in working on "social issues/problems" than male respondents, by nine percentage points. Males showed more interest in livelihood and peacebuilding issues, though not by as wide a margin.

- It's important to point out that every indicator we found about youth interest, engagement, perceptions, and preferences is impacted by the overall circumstances of the war, and they may change swiftly once Syria finds its way to peace. Our sample showed that right now half of our participants are optimistic about the future of youth activism—three times those who are pessimistic—and one-third are keeping their options open.

7. Recommendations

Reflecting on previous results while looking for answers about what should be done to boost youth engagement in public affairs, we present the following recommendations for local and international actors on the Syrian scene, especially for the UN Office of Special Envoy.

- **Long-term interventions.** Whatever intervention(s) regarding enhancement of youth engagement are implemented, they must take a long-term approach. The reforming of relationships between youth and their communities, and between youth and authorities, will require a lengthy process of social change. Because of the current transitional period in Syria, challenges to this process include political fragmentation and the absence of healthy political lives.

- **Both local and national approach.** This study revealed how the levels of interest, engagement, and priorities vary among different areas; it is then crucial that any intervention consider these differences. Although there is significant common ground across the areas targeted in this study, the unique features of each local context and its dynamics should be taken into account.

- **Consider Youth Priorities.** The range of interventions must be linked to youth priorities in order to gain the highest possible engagement. Accordingly, programs in regime and opposition areas should prioritize both livelihood and educational interventions. These same intervention types, in addition to social issues, should take priority in Syrian communities in Turkey. In SDF areas, youth engagement programs should focus first on peace-building and political stability, and then on education and rehabilitation.

- **Organize youth.** This study suggests that the largest segment of Syrian youth are not organized within any collective framework. As collective action by youth is the only way to achieve any impact, actors must make the effort to build strategy for youth organizing, strategies built on creating an environment that encourages youth to get together and teaches them how to establish their own frameworks in a manner that will self-sustain going forward.

For policymakers:
- **Invest in strength points.** A coalition of youth who are interested in and optimistic about public affairs is a strength in any public sphere. Investing in youth interest and tapping into their desire to play a future role in the public sphere is a sound tactic, enlisting their talents toward building and consolidating peace by developing and adopting policies that support the inclusive participation of youth in decision-making.

For the UN Office of Special Envoy (OSE):
- **Establish a consultation mechanism** that ensures the meaningful engagement of youth in shaping and advancing the UN-led political settlement in Syria.

For donors:
- **Widen the most popular engagement space.** Strengthening the current role of humanitarian and civil society organizations in engaging youth in the public sphere is a sound strategy, as these sectors were deemed the most effective means of engagement by the study participants. There should be a particular focus on community-based organization, volunteering teams, and single-event projects.

- **Widen multidimensional empowerment programs for youth.** Raise political and civic awareness, dialogue, and
tolerance culture through more inclusive workshops, training courses, and other types of activities.

	Survey of Youth and Public Sphere			
	Section 1: General Information			
1	Sex/Gender	1	Male	
		2	Female	
		3	Other	
2	Age	1	18 - 21 years old	
		2	22 - 25 years old	
		3	26 - 29 years old	
		4	30 - 33 years old	
3	Education Level	1	Uneducated	
		2	Primary Education	
		3	Intermediate Education	
		4	Secondary Education (10-12, academic or technical)	
		5	Intermediate Institute (technical study/certification)	
		6	University	
		7	Above University	
4	What is your current occupation (or your most recent, if you	1	Public Sector Employee	
		2	Private Sector Employee	
		3	Craftsman	
		4	Farm Worker	
		5	Low-Skilled/Unskilled Labor	
		6	Business Owner or Investor	
		7	Student	
		8	I have never worked before	
		9	Other (please specify)	
5	Place of Residence	1	Damascus	
		2	Rural Damascus	
		3	Idlib	
		4	A'zaz	
		5	Alraee	
		6	Alqamishli	
		7	Ar Raqqah	
		8	Gaziantep	
		9	Istanbul	
		10	As-Sweida	
6	Are you an old resident of this area or a newcomer to it after	1	Old Resident	
		2	Newcomer	
8	How would you describe your status of living?	1	High	
		2	Medium	
		3	Low	
9	Martial Status	1	Single (Never Married)	
		2	Married	
		3	Separated/Divorced	
		4	Widowed	
10	Ethnic/Cultural Background	1	Arabian	
		2	Kurdish	
		3	Turkmen	
		4	Other (please Specify)	

		Section 2: Indications of Interest		
101	How would you describe your degree of interest in public affairs in Syria?	1	High Interest	
		2	Fair Interest	
		3	Limited Interest	
		4	Very Limited Interest	
		5	No Interest at All	
102	Do you follow news related to public affairs in Syria?	1	Never	
		2	Rarely	
		3	Sometimes	**Skip to 104**
		4	Often	**Skip to 104**
		5	Always	**Skip to 104**
103	Why are you not interested in following the news?	1	I don't feel it helps me personally	
		2	There is nothing new in the news	
		3	I avoid it so as not to affect myself negatively	**Skip to 106**
		4	I don't have time to follow up	
		5	Other (please specify)	
104	What source do you use most often for news?	1	International Media	
		2	Arab Media	
		3	Local Media	
		4	Influencers on Social Media	
		5	News Groups on WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.	
		6	Other (please specify)	
105	Do you usually re-check the news you receive through these channels with other sources?	1	Yes	
		2	No	
106	How would you describe your level of familiarity with each of the following public affairs in Syria?			
	A. The course of political negotiations and their developments	1	Well Informed	
	B. Control maps and operations on the ground	2	Somewhat Informed	
	C. Conditions in other regions of Syria	3	Limited Knowledge	
	D. The situation of Syrians in other countries	4	I am not informed at all	
	E. The work of humanitarian organizations and civil society organizations			
	F. Security Council Resolution No. 2250 on Youth			
107	For residents of Turkey: How would you describe your degree of interest in public affairs in Turkey?	1	High Interest	Link with Question 8
		2	Fair Interest	
		3	Limited Interest	
		4	Very Limited Interest	
		5	No Interest at All	
		Section 3: Participation Indicators		
201	Have you ever voluntarily participated in any of the following collective frameworks?			
	A. Professional or Student Associations	1	Yes, and I still do	
	B. Humanitarian or Civil Society Organizations	2	Yes, but I have cut off contact or been cut off	
	C. Community-Based Organizations	3	No	**Skip to 209**
	D. Volunteer Teams or Campaigns	4	I prefer not to answer	
	E. Social, Sports, or Other Clubs			
	F. Local Government Institutions			
	G. Political Parties or Movements			
	H. Military Forces or Organizations			
	J. Other (please specify)			

202	Have you participated in any activities related to these frameworks during the last three months? (Workshops, seminars, meetings, etc.)	1	Yes	
		2	No	**Skip to 206**
203	Please indicate the number of such activities		(.................)	
204	What was the last activity you participated in?		(.................)	
205	What impression did you get from your participation in this activity?	1	Positive: I felt that my presence was effective	
		2	Negative: I felt that my presence was ineffective	
		3	Other (please Specify)	
206	Have you ever been assigned a leadership role within these frameworks?	1	Yes	
		2	No	
207	Have you ever been nominated during a leadership role election within these frameworks?	1	Yes	
		2	No	
208	Have you ever participated in any internal election within these frameworks?	1	Yes	
		2	No	
209	Have you ever participated in any public election?	1	Yes	
		2	No	
210	In your daily life, do you engage in discussions of public affairs with your close social circles, such as friends and family?	1	Frequently	
		2	Sometimes	
		3	Rarely	
		4	Never	
211	Do you discuss public affairs with people from a wider social environment (colleagues at work, school, etc.)?	1	Frequently	
		2	Sometimes	
		3	Rarely	
		4	Never	
212	Do you interact with topics related to public affairs on social media?	1	Frequently	
		2	Sometimes	
		3	Rarely	
		4	Never	
Section 4: Perceptions and Trends				
301	For you, what does participation in public affairs mean?	1	It's my civic duty	
		2	It's a right I must stive to attain	
		3	It's a stressful area best avoided	
		4	It's a risky endeavor with consequences	
		5	Other (please specify)	
302	**Please answer yes or no to the following:**			
	A. Have you ever participated in any programs to enable young people to participate in public affairs?	1	Yes	
	B. Have you ever had the opportunity to participate in any of the youth empowerment programs?	2	No	

	C. Have you ever heard of any youth empowerment programs that have been implemented in the area where you live?		
	D. If you were given an opportunity to participate in a public matter, such as receiving an invitation to participate in a workshop, a campaign, or others, would you accept the invitation?		
	E. In your view, are spaces for participation in public affairs limited to political parties and civil society?		
303	**Please state your position on each of the following common sayings:**		
	A. "Young people should take care of their business and their families and not think about anything outside of that."	1 Agree	
	B. "Young people have energy but they lack wisdom, so they should listen to the older ones."	2 Disagree	
	C. "What is happening in Syria is beyond the youth's ability to influence it."	3 Neutral	
	D. "Experience has proven that young people are not able to work collectively and in an orderly fashion."		
	E. "Young people have played important roles when they have the opportunity, and will get back to work when they have the opportunity again."		
	F. "There are no boundaries between public and private affairs; what happens abroad affects us in the end."		
304	How do you assess the level of youth presence as individuals or as groups in the public scene in your area?		
		1 They have a strong presence	
		2 They have a tangible presence	
		3 They have a weak presence	
		4 They have no presence	
305	In your opinion, how effective are each of the following factors in limiting youth participation in public affairs?		
		1 Very Effective	
	A. Livelihood pressures on young people	2 Somewhat Effective	
	B. Security conditions/political instability in Syria	3 Somewhat Ineffective	
	C. Lack of youth regulatory frameworks	4 Very Ineffective	
	D. Poor education/rehabilitation among youth		
	E. Reluctance of young people to participate		
	F. Fear of society		
	G. Fear of authorities		
	H. Other factors (please specify)		
306	How optimistic/pessimistic are you about the future of the relationship between youth and public affairs?		
		1 Very Optimistic	
		2 Optimistic	
		3 I'm Not Sure	
		4 Pessimistic	
		5 Very Pessimistic	
307	If you had the opportunity to raise an issue or a problem of	(................................)	
308	Imagine that you had the opportunity to make recommendations to decision-makers regarding the promotion of youth participation in public affairs. What	(................................)	